

The Great Gatsby



by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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The Great Gatsby: Introduction

In 1925, *The Great Gatsby* was published and hailed as an artistic and material success for its young author, [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#). It is considered a vastly more mature and artistically masterful treatment of Fitzgerald's themes than his earlier fiction. These works examine the results of the Jazz Age generation's adherence to false material values.

In *The Great Gatsby*'s nine chapters, Fitzgerald presents the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby, as related in a first-person narrative by Nick Carraway. Carraway reveals the story of a farmer's son-turned racketeer, named Jay Gatz. His ill-gotten wealth is acquired solely to gain acceptance into the sophisticated, moneyed world of the woman he loves, Daisy Fay Buchanan. His romantic illusions about the power of money to buy respectability and the love of Daisy—the “golden girl” of his dreams—are skillfully and ironically interwoven with episodes that depict what Fitzgerald viewed as the callousness and moral irresponsibility of the affluent

American society of the 1920s.

America at this time experienced a cultural and lifestyle revolution. In the economic arena, the stock market boomed, the rich spent money on fabulous parties and expensive acquisitions, the automobile became a symbol of glamour and wealth, and profits were made, both legally and illegally. The whirlwind pace of this post-[World War I](#) era is captured in Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, whose tragic quest and violent death foretell the collapse of that era and the onset of disillusionment with the American dream. By the end of the novel, the reader slowly realizes that Carraway is transformed as he recognizes Gatsby's moral superiority to the Buchanans. In fact, the triumph of Gatsby's legacy is reached by Nick Carraway's ruminations at the end of the book about Gatsby's valiant, however futile, attempts to regain his past love.

The discrepancy between Gatsby's dream vision and reality is a prominent theme in this book. Other motifs include Gatsby's quest for the American Dream; class conflict (the Wilsons vs. the Buchanans and the underworld lowbrows vs. Gatsby); the cultural rift between East and West; and the contrast between innocence and experience in the narrator's life. A rich aesthetic experience with many subtleties in tone and content, this novel can be read over and over again for new revelations and continued pleasure.

The Great Gatsby: Overview

In this Section:

- The Life and Work of F. Scott Fitzgerald
- Historical Background
- Master List of Characters
- Summary of the Novel
- Structure of the Novel
- Estimated Reading Time
- Timeline of *The Great Gatsby*

The Life and Work of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, now regarded as the spokesman for the “Lost Generation” of the 1920s, was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1896. His childhood and youth seem, in retrospect, as poetic as the works he later wrote. The life he lived became “the stuff of fiction,” the characters and the plots a rather thinly-disguised autobiography. Like Jay Gatsby, the title character of his most famous novel, Fitzgerald created a vision which he wanted to become, a “Platonic conception of himself,” and “to this conception he was faithful to the end.”

Fitzgerald was educated at parochial prep schools where he received strict Roman Catholic training. The religious instruction never left him. Ironically, he was denied burial in a Catholic cemetery because of his rather uproarious lifestyle, which ended in depression and alcoholism. In the fall of 1909, during his second year at St. Paul Academy, Fitzgerald began publishing in the school magazine. Sent East for a disciplined education, he entered The Newman School, whose student body came from wealthy Catholic families all over the country. At The Newman School he developed a friendship and intense rapport with Father Sigourney Webster

Fay, a trustee and later headmaster of the school and the prototype for a character in [This Side of Paradise](#), Fitzgerald's first novel, published in 1920.

Upon his grandmother's death, Fitzgerald and the family received a rather handsome inheritance, yet Scott seemed always to be cast into a society where others enjoyed more affluence than he. However, like Gatsby, a self-made man, Fitzgerald became the embodiment of the American Dream—an American Don Quixote.

Thanks to another relative's money, Fitzgerald was able to enroll in Princeton in 1913. He never graduated from the Ivy League school; in fact, he failed several courses during his undergraduate years. However, he wrote revues for the Triangle Club, Princeton's musical comedy group, and "donned swishy, satiny dresses to romp onstage" alongside attractive chorus girls. Years later, after enjoying some literary fame, he was asked to speak at Princeton, an occasion which endeared the school to him in new ways. Today, Princeton houses his memoirs, including letters from [Ernest Hemingway](#) motion picture scripts, scrapbooks, and other mementos.

He withdrew from Princeton and entered the war in 1917, commissioned as a second lieutenant in the army. While in Officers Candidate School in Alabama, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, a relationship which is replicated in Jay Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and her fascination with a military man. He never made it to the European front, but he did come to the attention of New York publishers by the end of the war. Despite Zelda's breaking their engagement, they became re-engaged that fall. Their marriage produced one daughter—Scottie, who died in 1986. In 1919 his earnings totaled \$879; the following year, following the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, an instant success, his earnings increased to \$18,000.

By 1924 it was clear that Fitzgerald needed a change. He, Zelda, and Scottie moved to Europe, near the French Riviera, where he first met Ernest Hemingway [Gertrude Stein](#) and Edith Wharton. Before long, Zelda met and had an affair with Edouard Josanne, a relationship which Fitzgerald at first ignored but ultimately forced to a showdown. His writing may have profited because of her affair—according to biographer Andrew Turnbull, Fitzgerald's jealousy "sharpened the edge of Gatsby's and gave weight to Tom Buchanan's bullish determination to regain his wife."

To increase earnings he wrote some 160 short stories for magazines, works which, by his own admission, lacked luster. After Zelda's alcoholism had several times forced her commitment to an institution, Scott went to Hollywood to write screenplays, and struggled unsuccessfully to complete a final novel, [The Last Tycoon](#). He died in December of 1940 after a lifelong battle with alcohol and a series of heart attacks.

As early as 1920, Fitzgerald had in mind a tragic novel. He wrote to the president of Princeton that his novel would "say something fundamental about America, that fairy tale among nations." He saw our history as a great pageant and romance, the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream—and, he wrote, "If I am at the end of it that too is a place in the line of the pioneers." Perhaps because of that vision, he has been called America's greatest modern romantic writer, a purveyor of timeless fiction with a gift of evocation that has yet to be surpassed. His works reflect the spirit of his times, yet they are timeless.

One cannot fail to notice how much of himself Fitzgerald put into all his work; he spoke of writing as a "sheer paring away of oneself." A melange of characters replicate or at least suggest people in his acquaintance. Gatsby seems almost to be an existential extension of Fitzgerald's posture, a persona created perhaps as a premonition of his own tragic end.

The almost poetic craftsmanship of Fitzgerald's prose, combined with his insight into the American experience, presented an imperishable portrait of his age, securing for him a permanent and enviable place in literary history.

Historical Background

The Great Gatsby, published in 1925, pictures the wasted American Dream as it depicts the 1920s in America. It speaks to every generation of readers, its contemporaneity depending in part on its picturesque presentation of that decade Fitzgerald himself labeled the "Jazz Age" and in part on its commentary concerning the human experience. The externals change—the attire, the songs, the fads—but its value and nostalgic tone transcend these externals. The novel provides the reader with a wider, panoramic vision of the American Dream, with a

challenge to introspection if the reader reads sensitively and engages with the text.

The novel paints a vivid picture of America after World War I. From the postwar panic and realism evolved a shaking of social morés, a loss of innocence, a culture shock. Values of the old generation were rejected, with fashions including skirts above the knee and bobbed hair; a Bohemian lifestyle appeared with little moral or religious restraint; and innovative dances and musical forms that were considered by some to be obscene became the rage. It was a time of high living and opulence.

At the same time, the popular *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) lifestyle and frivolity reflected an extreme feeling of alienation and nonidentity. A sense of melancholy and nostalgia existed, a discontent characterized by longing for conditions as they used to be. Americans were disenchanted. The war had promised so much; the results were disillusioning.

In addition, the availability of the automobile contributed to a carefree moral stance. No longer did young people have to court in the parlor, under parents’ watchful eyes, for the car provided an escape from supervision. Historian Frederick Lewis Allen, in a study of “why the younger generation runs wild,” refers to the automobile as a “house of prostitution on wheels.” Prohibition, created by the Eighteenth Amendment, was violated widely, the results being the bootleggers, speakeasies, and underworld activities now commonly associated with the 1920s. These elements typify the decade Fitzgerald pictured in his novels.

As a result of this distance between expectations and reality, a chasm illustrated in the novel’s scenario, a social satire develops. The etymology of *satire*, originally meaning “a dish of mixed fruit” or “potpourri,” figures into the story as Fitzgerald fills the tapestry with every conceivable type in society. None of them seems happy. Acquiring a fortune by illicit means, Fitzgerald implies, will produce little happiness. A strong case can, therefore, be made that *The Great Gatsby* is social satire. The *zeitgeist*, the temper of the times, becomes extremely important: the milieu in which Fitzgerald lived and wrote shapes the content and the message of the book.

Fitzgerald’s picture parallels that of [The Waste Land](#) by [T. S. Eliot](#) a poet whose beliefs and poetry influenced Fitzgerald as he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. As a purveyor of the belief that we have wasted our dream, that we have turned our green continent into a veritable waste land, Fitzgerald was, perhaps, a prophet, a seer.

In one way, this novel is a Horatio Alger story with the conventional rags-to-riches motif; and, as such, it presents the unspoiled, untainted original American Dream. Jay Gatsby rises like Icarus above his rather shiftless parents to the riches of Midas, first witnessing a flamboyant lifestyle as cabin boy on the yacht of Dan Cody, a setting replete with alcohol, women, and ubiquitous parties. Such is the presentation of the American Dream. Ironically, the only ways to achieve such dreams are sordid and degraded.

The conclusion of his experience convinces Nick that we have made a mess of the “green breast of the New World,” the world that the Dutch settlers saw when they came to this continent. A tawdry dream of self-love, greed, and corruption replaced the wholesomeness of the original dream founded on virtues and moral standards. A reliable picture of America in the 1920s, and at once a glamourized presentation of such meretricious living, *The Great Gatsby* has become a touchstone by which we measure quality of life in present-day America.

Although he was an artist, not a historian, he produced one of the most timeless and reliable pictures of this time in America’s past, a veritable historical document. This “lost generation,” to use Gertrude Stein’s famous phrase, found a spokesman in Fitzgerald.

Master List of Characters

Nick Carraway—the narrator. Thirty years old, he is a moralist who becomes a foil to every other character. He lives next door to Jay Gatsby and, thus, becomes Gatsby’s link to Daisy, his cousin.

Jay Gatsby—the title character. A romantic idealist, he devotes his life to amassing wealth which he believes will win Daisy and thus fulfill his dream.

Daisy Buchanan—Nick’s cousin, Tom’s wife, and Gatsby’s dream girl. Incapable of love, she represents the idolized upper class.

Tom Buchanan—Daisy’s husband. Incapable of feeling guilt or any other emotion, he represents brutality, the moral carelessness of the rich, pseudo-intellectualism, and racism.

Jordan Baker—a friend of Daisy’s from Louisville. A young and compulsively dishonest professional golfer, she is ironically involved with Nick, whose identifying characteristic is honesty. She, too, has no emotions and represents the coldness and cruelty of the rich.

George Wilson—proprietor of a garage in the Valley of Ashes. He represents the fate of the common working man, an “everyman” who believes a strong work ethic will eventually capture for him the American Dream.

Myrtle Wilson—George’s wife. Her vitality attracts Tom. She wants to escape her lower class status, yet has no sense of values.

Owl Eyes—a middle-aged “fair-weather” friend of Gatsby’s.

Pammy Buchanan—daughter of Tom and Daisy. She appears as a possession to be displayed. Always dressed in white like her mother, she represents the shallowness of her parents.

Henry C. Gatz—Gatsby’s father. He is proud of his son’s prosperity.

Meyer Wolfsheim—a representative of the underworld. He has used Gatsby as a front man and is proud of his connections. Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheim is the man who fixed the 1919 World Series.

Catherine—Myrtle’s sister. She is always available to have a good time.

Mr. and Mrs. McKee—tenants in a New York City hotel. They attend a party with the main characters.

Ewing Klipspringer—a “boarder” at Gatsby’s house.

Michaelis—owner of a coffee shop near George Wilson’s garage, who befriends George.

Mr. Sloane—a neighbor of Gatsby’s who stops by while horseback riding.

Summary of the Novel

The narrator of the story, Nick Carraway, has just returned from war and, restless in the West, goes East to work. In flashbacks he reveals the story of Jay Gatsby, his next-door neighbor, as he learns it. The nine chapters develop around seven parties interspersed with flashbacks.

Immediately after Nick moves to West Egg, he visits Daisy Buchanan, his second cousin “once-removed,” and her husband Tom, a fellow Yale graduate, for dinner. Here Nick meets Jordan Baker, Daisy’s friend from Louisville, who reveals that Tom is having an affair with Myrtle Wilson, the wife of a garage owner in the

Valley of Ashes. Nick is shocked at the lack of morality in every level: the *nouveau riche*, the “old money,” and those with no money at all.

Not long after, at the second party, Tom introduces Nick to Myrtle, who invites her sister Catherine and the McKees, residents in the hotel where the party takes place in New York City, to complete the guest list. At Gatsby’s first party in West Egg, Nick meets a myriad of high-profile guests, most of whom have not been invited, all of whom ignore the statute concerning prohibition. The atmosphere is much like that of “an amusement park.” The next party is lunch in town with Meyer Wolfsheim, one of Gatsby’s business “connections,” and obviously an underworld character.

Next, Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby’s parties. By this time, Gatsby has used Nick, his next-door neighbor and Daisy’s cousin, to set up a rendezvous with this young lady he had wanted to marry five years before. Daisy had married Tom Buchanan because of his immense wealth. Through the intervening years, Gatsby had managed to amass a fortune greater than Tom’s and idealistically believes Daisy will leave Tom for him. Another party at Gatsby’s mansion includes Tom and Daisy and a litany of diverse guests. The final catastrophic party at the Plaza Hotel in New York provides Tom the opportunity to confront Gatsby about his obsession with Daisy and Gatsby’s alleged underworld activities.

Driving home from New York City, Daisy strikes and kills Myrtle Wilson with Gatsby’s car. Gatsby, however, tells Nick he was driving the car. After tracing the yellow car to Gatsby, George Wilson shoots Gatsby to death in his pool and turns the gun on himself.

After Gatsby’s poorly-attended funeral, Nick returns to the Midwest, disillusioned and disgusted by the experience.

Structure of the Novel

In the tradition of Geoffrey Chaucer’s [The Canterbury Tales](#) and Joseph Conrad’s [Heart of Darkness](#), this novel is structured as a frame tale. From as early as the [Middle Ages](#) writers of English have employed the device of framing a story with another story. The experience in *The Great Gatsby* is actually Nick Carraway’s, not Jay Gatsby’s. He relates Gatsby’s story. Because Nick is a moral exemplar from start to finish, the reader sees him as a reliable narrator; we can believe his account of Gatsby.

By the second page of the novel, the story becomes an account of Gatsby’s story as told in flashbacks through Nick’s point of view. This flashback structure can make it difficult to place the events of the novel in their proper time sequence. For an explanation of the proper sequence of events, see the timeline of *The Great Gatsby* below.

The dominant effect of this literary convention is veracity: the reader can believe that what Nick says is truth. The end of the story appears in the beginning, for immediately the reader becomes aware that Nick is disenchanted with the immorality of the East and wants to return to the West. After his “privileged glimpse into the heart,” a journey he does not wish to repeat, the story turns to Nick’s perceptions of Gatsby and of Long Island. Gatsby’s dream almost replicates that of the “Dutch sailors” who, in their discovery of the New World, found a latter-day Camelot. Such a similarity justifies Nick’s belief that Gatsby’s dream made him “worth more than the whole damn bunch put together.” He had “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness,” that *almost* justified his illegal doings in the eyes of Nick.

Built upon the conventional rags-to-riches motif, this novel fits the mold of a Horatio Alger story. Typically, the poor boy risks himself to save the “damsel in distress” in a wagon pulled at breakneck speed by a runaway horse. As a result of saving the young lady, he works for her father, usually a man of means, and ultimately inherits her father’s business and marries her. In a sense he raises himself by his “own bootstraps.” Such is the ideal American Dream—an innocent, pure form of Thomas Jefferson’s “pursuit of

happiness.” In Fitzgerald’s parallel, “the poor boy,” Gatsby, naïvely determines to amass wealth in whatever ways necessary, the implication being that nothing can preclude or obstruct his winning the damsel’s hand. Like the archetypal Cinderella story, the most deserving must always win Prince Charming and become heir to a massive fortune. Tragically, Gatsby had learned well from American society that dishonesty and illicit means of procuring a fortune will win what pure love and resolve cannot.

Estimated Reading Time

An average reader can complete the novel in four to five hours. A close reading will take longer perhaps, but even reading critically, the reading should not require much more than five hours.

Timeline of *The Great Gatsby*

Age 17—Gatsby meets Dan Cody and learns about the leisure class.

October 1917—Gatsby meets Daisy. She is 18; Jordan is 16.

1918—She almost marries him.

1918—By fall “she is gay again.”

June 1919—Daisy marries Tom Buchanan after receiving a \$350,000 necklace. Gatsby is at Oxford.

August 1919—Tom is already having an affair.

April 1920—Daisy and Tom's daughter Pammy is born.

Augumn 1921—Nick comes back from the war.

Spring 1922—Nick comes to the East and sets up residence in West Egg, Long Island.

Summer 1922—The main action of the novel takes place.

Autumn 1922—Nick returns to the Midwest.

The Great Gatsby: F. Scott Fitzgerald Biography

In this Section:

- Biography
- Timeline for F. Scott Fitzgerald
- List of Major Works

Biography

F. Scott Fitzgerald was an American novelist and short-story writer of the Roaring Twenties. Since his early work shows a romantic feeling for “the promises of life” at college and in “The East,” he acquired the epithet “the spokesman of the Jazz Age.” His first novel, [This Side of Paradise](#), was the first American novel to deal with college undergraduate life in the [World War I](#) era. A handsome and charming man, Fitzgerald was quickly adopted by the young generation of his time. His second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, is a lively but shallow book, but his third, *The Great Gatsby*, is one of the most penetrating descriptions of American life in the 1920s.

F Scott Fitzgerald

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896 [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) was the son of Edward Fitzgerald, who worked for Proctor and Gamble and brought his family to Buffalo and Syracuse, New York, for most of his son's first decade. Edward Fitzgerald's great-great-grandfather was the brother of the grandfather of Francis Scott Key, who wrote the poem "The Star-Spangled Banner." This fact was of great significance to Mrs. Fitzgerald, Mollie McQuillan, and later to Scott. Mollie Fitzgerald's own family could offer no pretensions to aristocracy, but her father, an Irish immigrant who came to America in 1843, was a self-made businessman. Equally important was Fitzgerald's sense of having come from two widely different Celtic strains. He had early on developed an inferiority complex in a family where the "black Irish half ... had the money and looked down on the Maryland side of the family who had, and really had ... 'breeding,'" according to Scott Donaldson in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Out of this divergence of classes in his family background arose what critics called F. Scott's "double vision." He had the ability to experience the lifestyle of the wealthy from an insider's perspective, yet never felt a part of this clique and always felt the outsider.

As a youth, Fitzgerald revealed a flair for dramatics, first in St. Paul, where he wrote original plays for amateur production, and later at The Newman Academy in Hackensack, New Jersey. At Princeton, he composed lyrics for the university's famous Triangle Club productions. Fitzgerald was also a writer and actor with the Triangle Club at college. Before he could graduate, he volunteered for the army during World War I. He spent the weekends writing the earliest drafts of his first novel. The work was accepted for publication in 1919 by Charles Scribner's Sons. The popular and financial success that accompanied this event enabled Fitzgerald to marry Zelda Sayre, whom he met at training camp in Alabama. Zelda played a pivotal role in the writer's life, both in a tempestuous way and an inspirational one. Mostly, she shared his extravagant lifestyle and artistic interests. In the 1930s she was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and was hospitalized in Switzerland and then Maryland, where she died in a fire.

For some time, Fitzgerald lived with his wife in Long Island. There, the setting for *The Great Gatsby*, he entertained in a manner similar to his characters, with expensive liquors and entertainment. He revelled in demonstrating the antics of the crazy, irresponsible rich, and carried this attitude wherever he went. Especially on the Riviera in France the Fitzgeralds befriended the elite of the cultural world and wealthy classes, only to offend most of them in some way by their outrageous behavior. Self-absorbed, drunk, and eccentric, they sought and received attention of all kinds. The party ended with the hospitalization of Zelda for schizophrenia in Prangins, a Swiss clinic, and, coincidentally, with the [Great Depression](#) of 1929, which tolled the start of Scott's personal depression.

In the decade before his death, Fitzgerald's troubles and the debilitating effects of his alcoholism limited the quality and amount of his writing. Nonetheless, it was also during this period that he attempted his most psychologically complex and aesthetically ambitious novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1934). After Zelda's breakdown, Fitzgerald became romantically involved with Sheila Graham, a gossip columnist in Hollywood, during the last years of his life. He also wrote but did not finish the novel [The Last Tycoon](#), now considered to be one of his best works, about the Hollywood motion picture industry. Fitzgerald died suddenly of a heart attack, most likely induced by a long addiction to alcohol, on December 21, 1940. At the time of his death, he was virtually forgotten and unread. A growing Fitzgerald revival, begun in the 1950s, led to the publication of numerous volumes of stories, letters, and notebooks. One of his literary critics, Stephen Vincent Benet, concluded in his review of *The Last Tycoon*, "You can take off your hats now, gentlemen, and I think perhaps you had better. This is not a legend, this is a reputation—and, seen in perspective, it may well be one of the most secure reputations of our time."

Timeline for F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896—F. Scott Fitzgerald born in St. Paul, Minnesota

1911-1913—attends catholic prep school in New Jersey

1913-1917—attends Princeton University; writes dramatic and humorous pieces

1917-1919—joins the army; meets Zelda Sayre in Montgomery, Alabama

1920—publishes *This Side of Paradise*; marries Zelda

1921—publishes first short story collection, *Flappers and Philosophers*; daughter Frances "Scottie" born

1922—publishes his second novel, [The Beautiful and Damned](#)

1923—satirical play, *The Vegetable*, fails

1925—publishes *The Great Gatsby*; befriends [Ernest Hemingway](#) in Paris

1926—publishes *All the Sad Young Men*

1927—moves family to Delaware; first attempt to write for Hollywood

1930—Zelda has first nervous breakdown in Paris

1934—publishes [Tender is the Night](#)

1935—publishes *Taps at Reveille*

1937—moves back to Hollywood as scriptwriter; begins affair with Sheila Graham

1940—dies in Hollywood; buried at Rockville, Maryland

1948—Zelda dies in fire at sanitarium in North Carolina

Major Works

This Side of Paradise (1920)

Fitzgerald's debut novel, an exuberant, semi-autobiographical coming of age story, recounts the romantic and

social adventures of the sensitive and vain Amory Blaine. It was considered a guidebook for rebellious youth of the twenties.

The Beautiful and Damned (1923)

The Beautiful and Damned recalls the personal history of a wealthy, attractive young man, Anthony Patch, and his beautiful, selfish wife Gloria. From pampered childhood to alcoholic, debt-ridden decline, Fitzgerald explores the corruptive influences of money.

The Great Gatsby (1925)

His third and best novel, *The Great Gatsby* is considered one of the most important works in American literature. Gatsby tells the story of a self-made millionaire and the tragic pursuit of his lost love.

Tender is the Night (1934)

Set in Europe, *Tender is the Night* traces the decline of a brilliant American psychiatrist, Dick Diver, during the course of his marriage to a wealthy mental patient.

The Last Tycoon (1941)

Fitzgerald's fifth novel, unfinished at the time of his death, promised to be his finest work. It tells the story of the heroic movie producer, Monroe Stahr, and his struggle for artistic integrity against the money-obsessed influences of Hollywood.

Fitzgerald wrote over 160 short stories, including "The Rich Boy," "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz," "May Day," "Babylon Revisited" and "Financing Finnegan." Excerpted letters to his daughter were published in 1945 as [The Crack-Up](#).

The Great Gatsby: Summary

A dinner party

Nick Carraway, the narrator, announces that he is writing his account two years after the events described. Aged twenty-nine, in the spring of 1922 he travels East from his midwestern home to work as a bond salesman in New York. He has rented a house on West Egg, sandwiched between the mansions along the shore of Long Island Sound. He knows nobody except his distant cousin Daisy Buchanan, who lives with her wealthy husband Tom on East Egg, across the bay. Nick drives over to dinner with the couple, whom he has not seen in years, and their guest Jordan Baker. Tom, an athletic polo player, betrays his boorish arrogance as he expounds a racist theory he has read. Daisy's magical voice compels Nick forward to listen to her, but he suspects her sincerity when she says she is unhappy. In contrast, dark-haired Jordan strikes Nick with her jaunty self-assurance. At one point, Nick's neighbor "Gatsby" is mentioned and Daisy catches the name in surprise. Dinner is tense; Jordan reveals that it is Tom's mistress telephoning him, and Daisy appears to know. Returning to West Egg, Nick first sees Gatsby. As Nick is about to call to him, Gatsby stretches out both arms towards the water or the green dock light opposite; Nick is mystified.

Myrtle's party

Commuting across the "valley of ashes" to the city, Tom suddenly pulls Nick from their train to meet his mistress, Myrtle. She is a blowsy, vital woman, the wife of servile garage-owner George Wilson. Myrtle catches the next train with them, and impulsively buys a puppy while she and Tom insist that Nick accompany them to their city apartment. Nick reads discreetly while the couple are in the bedroom. Myrtle decides to throw a party, and the apartment fills with people and social chatter. The puppy barks in the smoky air, the party gets progressively drunker, and Nick wonders what the scene would look like to an observer outside. Myrtle starts chanting Daisy's name, and Tom brutally breaks her nose; the sound of wailing accompanies Nick as he leaves.

Gatsby's party

Nick describes the lavish parties that nightly transform Gatsby's garden. One afternoon a butler brings Nick a formal invitation, and at the party Nick is relieved to spot Jordan in the swirling crowd. Nick hears many extravagant and contradictory rumors from the guests. He and Jordan come across comical "Owl Eyes," a bespectacled man trying to sober up in the library. Later, an elegant young man invites Nick for a hydroplane excursion next morning, and as Nick confesses he has never met their host, the man reveals himself to be Gatsby. Later still, Jordan is called to speak with Gatsby in the house, and then hints at his amazing story but won't tell more. Leaving the party, Nick sees a car in a ditch with its wheel off; the drunken culprit cannot understand the car's predicament. Nick interrupts the story here to reflect that he was actually very busy in the weeks between these three parties described, enjoying the adventure of New York. He catches up with Jordan again and learns more of her character; unlike Nick, she is incurably dishonest, and a careless driver.

Lunch in New York

Gatsby drives Nick to lunch in the city and tells him more about his past. Nick is unsure whether to believe it all but decides to trust Gatsby when he produces an authentic-looking medal as proof. Gatsby then hints of a favor he will ask Nick that day. They have lunch with a sinister friend of Gatsby's, Meyer Wolfsheim, who was apparently responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series. When Tom Buchanan appears, Gatsby looks embarrassed and disappears before Nick can introduce the men.

Tea with Jordan

That afternoon, Jordan tells Nick the story and makes Gatsby's request. Jordan met Daisy in 1917 and in the company of a young soldier. For a time after, Jordan heard only rumors of her before Daisy became engaged to Tom. As bridesmaid, Jordan witnessed Daisy's distress the eve of the wedding, as she held a mysterious letter until it dissolved. Yet the couple married and traveled, although Tom got in the papers after a car accident with another girl, and Daisy had a little girl. When "Gatsby" was mentioned at their recent dinner party, Jordan realized that this is Daisy's young soldier. Gatsby bought his house to be opposite Daisy, hoping she would appear at a party. As she hasn't, he now wants Nick to ask Daisy to tea so that he might meet her again. This afternoon, Nick first kisses Jordan, whose real presence contrasts to Gatsby's ghostly devotion to Daisy.

Reunion

Nick invites Daisy to tea and the day arrives, pouring rain. Despite Gatsby's nervousness, Daisy does arrive. The reunion is difficult, but after Nick leaves the couple alone, they are "radiant" together on his return. They take Nick over to Gatsby's house so that Gatsby can show it off, and Gatsby is clearly overwrought by the significance of the occasion after such a long wait.

Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

Another party

Nick reflects on Gatsby's "notoriety," and to clear up misconceptions, he provides a brief biography of "James Gatz" who, at seventeen, invented and transformed himself into Jay Gatsby. Nick is over at his neighbor's one afternoon as Tom Buchanan drops by with another couple. The three are rude guests, and leave before Gatsby can join them, as he had planned to. The following Saturday, Tom escorts Daisy there, dismissing the extravagance as a "menagerie." Gatsby and Daisy dance, then sit on Nick's porch together as Nick keeps a lookout for Tom. Afterwards, Gatsby says that Daisy doesn't understand. Gatsby obviously expects to repeat the past—when Daisy renounces Tom, she and Gatsby can begin where they left off five

years before.

Confrontation

Nick is invited to the Buchanans' with Gatsby and Jordan on a sweltering day at the end of the summer, during which Daisy has spent much time with Gatsby. Daisy's daughter Pammy says hello, then the group casts about for something to do. Daisy suggests the city. When an innocent comment betrays her feeling for Gatsby in front of Tom, the tension worsens. Daisy gets into Tom's car with Gatsby, and Jordan and Nick ride with Tom. Tom stops at Wilson's garage, and is dismayed to hear that Wilson plans to get away with Myrtle. Nick sees Myrtle intent at the window, plainly thinking that Jordan is Daisy. They take a suite at the Plaza Hotel for mint juleps. Finally, Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy doesn't love her husband, and they confront one another, as Daisy falters.

“Oh, you want too much!” she cried to Gatsby. “I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past.” She began to sob helplessly. “I did love him once—but I loved you too.”

Gatsby's eyes opened and closed.

“You loved me *too*?” he repeated.

Aftermath

The two men drive their own cars away, and Gatsby and Daisy go on ahead while Nick remembers that it is his thirtieth birthday. The story abruptly mentions a “witness” at the “inquest.”

Wilson, acting suspiciously, revealed to the coffee-store proprietor Michaelis that he had locked his wife up. Later, Myrtle runs in front of a car from the city, and is killed. Nick resumes his perspective as Tom's car pulls up to the commotion at the garage. It becomes clear that the “death car” was Gatsby's. Arriving back at the Buchanans', Nick finds Gatsby keeping a watch for Daisy, worried about Tom. Nick gathers that Daisy was driving the car that Myrtle ran in front of because she probably believed that Tom was in it.

Nick warns Gatsby his car will be traced, but he will not leave Daisy, his “grail.” Nick describes Gatsby's version of their courtship and Daisy's marriage. Gatsby plans to swim, and Nick leaves with a compliment of friendship and thanks for hospitality. Nick then pieces together the times and events that lead Wilson to find Gatsby in the pool, and shoot him and then himself.

Conclusion

Nick arranges the funeral at which only one former guest, Owl Eyes, appears, and meets with Gatsby's pathetically proud father. Nick reflects that the East is haunted for him, and he decides to go home. Nick has chance meetings with both Jordan and Tom, and is already distant from them. He looks at Gatsby's house before leaving, imagining past wonder at the sight of this new world, relating this with Gatsby's own belief and wonder.

The Great Gatsby: Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

New Characters

Nick Carraway: the narrator of the story

Daisy Buchanan: Nick's cousin

Tom Buchanan: Daisy's husband and a fellow Yale graduate of Nick's

Jordan Baker: a friend of Daisy and, eventually, a friend of Nick Carraway

Jay Gatsby: Nick's mysterious next-door neighbor

Summary

Soon after Nick Carraway returns from the war, he abandons his native Middle West and the hardware business of his forebears and goes East to enter the bond business. He rents a bungalow in West Egg, Long Island, the "less fashionable" of two peninsulas, and finds his house sandwiched between two huge houses that rent "for twelve or fifteen thousand a season."

Across the bay, in East Egg, live Nick's cousin Daisy and her husband Tom, who invite Nick for tea. Jordan Baker, a female golfer and friend of Daisy, informs Nick of Tom's affair with Myrtle Wilson in a noticeably nonchalant manner. Nick's reaction is that Daisy should "rush out of the house" and escape this immoral situation. She does not. Tom engages Nick in conversation, asking if he has read "The Rise of the Colored Empires" by Goddard. Tom concurs with the author's thesis that the white race is in danger of being overwhelmed by blacks. This theory, he argues, is all scientific.

After the get-together, Nick returns home and sees Jay Gatsby, his next-door neighbor, trembling, glancing seaward, looking at a single green light "that might have been the end of a dock." Just as quickly, Gatsby disappears from sight.

Analysis

In the frame of the novel, Nick quotes his father as having said, "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." At first the reader might think the advantages he alludes to are monetary, but then Nick acknowledges that he agrees with his father: "A sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth." Clearly, decency, not wealth, is the supreme value.

Nick immediately captures the confidence of the reader. Often "privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men," involuntarily making "riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart." Nick is trustworthy, a seer, even though he contends, "Most of the confidences were unsought." His are the traditional values from America's past. He acknowledges at the outset that Gatsby "represented everything" for which he had "an unaffected scorn"; paradoxically, however, he finds in Gatsby "something gorgeous," a dream quality with "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life." It was not Gatsby that, ultimately, Nick rejected in New York; it was "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams" that brought closure and finality to Nick's rite of passage. Thus, the brief introduction to Nick, a reliable narrator, takes on singular importance in understanding Fitzgerald's message.

Even in these early stages of the novel, the writer prepares subtly for his ultimate message. Fitzgerald alludes to "Midas and Morgan and Mæcenas," men of vast fortunes from mythology and Greek civilizations and the recent past, as Nick buys "a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities." These books stand on his shelf "in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets" of these barons of big finance. Juxtaposed to these names are references to this country's founders. When a newcomer to West Egg asks directions, Nick becomes a "guide, a pathfinder, an original settler." By juxtaposing these moneyed tycoons to the original "pathfinders" and "settlers," Fitzgerald subtly sets up the conflict between the untainted American Dream and the subsequent obsession with money. That Nick is enamored of such books suggests that even he can be impressed with wealth. That Tom explores books on racial prejudice as a science suggests that he is shallow, supercilious, and extremely snobby. This study of reading habits communicates significantly to the understanding of the characters.

At this early stage in the novel, a reference to the Middle West as “the ragged edge of the universe,” a rugged pioneer image, contrasts with the sophistication of the East, specifically New York City. The original settlers, those who came to the West, represent the quintessential work ethic while the moneyed people, or at least their descendants, represent a consumption ethic. Even dinner and after-dinner activities emphasize for Nick the difference in values. In the West an evening “was hurried from phase to phase toward its close,” representative of the work ethic in contrast to the pleasure and relative unimportance of work in the East, where making the most money with the least amount of effort seems to be the goal. A person with such aspirations would be, in the words of Tom, “a God damned fool to live anywhere else.” West Egg, in its eclectic “melting pot” neighborhood, takes on the symbolism and character of the Old West, the land discovered in the fulfillment of dreams. Conversely, elite East Egg comes across as sophisticated, superficial, and smug. To go anywhere, however, going from either East Egg or West Egg, the road must pass through the Valley of Ashes, the waste perhaps representing the hollowness of the American Dream.

In the opening chapter, also, are references to color, images which proliferate throughout the novel. In addition to the red and gold books, white—here describing “palaces of fashionable East Egg,” Daisy and Jordan’s dresses, and, most ironically, their “beautiful white girlhood”—deepens in symbolic interpretation. Inverting the universal symbol, in this work white represents *impurity*, or loss of innocence. The Buchanans’ mansion, “cheerful red-and-white,” glows in the afternoon sun reflecting gold. Because of the disregard for traditional marriage vows, the whiteness is ironic. Pastels, in this instance “rosy-colored space,” represent a fairy-tale, ephemeral quality, such as the unreality of the Buchanans’ lifestyle. With little if any work to do, games become increasingly important. Daisy fatuously describes Nick as “a rose, an absolute rose.” Later, Gatsby finds that a rose is a “grotesque thing” in an unreal world where ghosts, “breathing dreams like air,” drift “fortuitously about.”

Almost immediately, gray images are associated with decadence, decay, desolation, and waste—wasted vitality, wasted morals, and wasted dreams. Jordan Baker has “gray sun-strained eyes” looking out of a “wan” or pale, “discontented face”; she has “autumn-leaf yellow” hair, autumn being the archetypal symbol of death or dying. Although Nick is attracted to her, ultimately her lack of character closes out his interest. Being so often described with “gray” and autumn images connects her with decadence.

Finally, at the end of the chapter, Gatsby appears under the “silver pepper of the stars,” looking longingly at “a single green light.” Appearing almost like a glittering god, Gatsby often wears silver and gold. At one point, he wears a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie. Seemingly, the point of the metaphors and descriptions of his attire is to reinforce the idea that he is a son of a god.

The green, introduced first as the light at the end of a dock, has ambivalent interpretations. Green typically is associated with growth, spring, and new life. It signals “Go! Go! Go!” presumably for any generation. It is the color of money. All of these meanings apply in *The Great Gatsby*. Primarily, it is connected with Daisy, who turns out to be an unworthy dream. Colors, then, not only vivify images and create a picturesque vista for the reader but also facilitate Fitzgerald’s thematic commentary about reality and dreams.

Juxtaposed with Nick’s conclusion that “life is much more successfully looked at from a single window after all” is the contrast of two “windows” or discrete worlds—East Egg and West Egg. A bird’s eye view shows identically-contoured formations of land, “enormous eggs,” separated only by “a courtesy bay.” To the wingless counterpart, however, the eggs are dissimilar in “every particular except shape and size.” On West Egg, “the less fashionable of the two,” appear houses designed and built with no apparent restrictions or codes, a bungalow sandwiched between two mansions. By contrast, the houses on fashionable East Egg “glittered” with “white palaces.” The contrasting descriptions focus on *nouveau riche* or new money, with the possible implication of lack of refinement or class, and old money, with well-groomed houses and lawns accompanying well-groomed, well-bred occupants, who, at least superficially, are characterized by gentility.

The pursuit of this distorted American Dream leads to worship at unworthy shrines: beauty, youth, and pleasure become icons, gods unworthy of worship yet traceable as a quest as far back as Ponce de Leon, who searched for the Fountain of Youth. Resulting from the pursuit of these “ideals” are restlessness and unfulfilled lives. To reinforce this flawed concept and its effects, images of “restlessness” and “drifting” recur numerous times in the novel. Tom, forever living in the afterglow of his New Haven football days, now brings down a “string of polo ponies” from Lake Forest, seemingly to extend into adulthood collegiate activities; he “would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game.” Standing in riding clothes with legs apart, he appears aggressive, supercilious, “with a touch of paternal contempt,” a trait which Daisy emphasizes, to Tom’s chagrin. At one of Gatsby’s parties, Tom is introduced as the polo player, another description he detests. Later in this chapter, when Daisy mentions Pammy, their daughter, Tom hovers “restlessly about the room.”

Descriptive “tags” or epithets, another use of recurring words to describe the principal characters, enable the reader to visualize the characters. Tom is restless, careless, physical. He has drifted, “unrestfully,” and he will drift on forever, a defiant willfulness seeking fulfillment. His eyes flash restlessly. He hovers restlessly. He has “a supercilious manner, arrogant eyes.” He always leans “aggressively forward,” with enormous physical power, evidenced by a “great pack of muscle.” He has a cruel body “capable of enormous leverage,” but his voice is a “gruff, husky tenor” with a touch of “paternal contempt” in it. Jordan’s chin is lifted a little; she seems to be balancing some object on it, her body thrown backward at the shoulders “like a young cadet.” She has a “wan, charming discontented face,” and later she is described as having a “bored haughty face.” The tag which recurs in her description is *jauntiness*. At a party, Nick observes that she wears evening dresses, all her dresses, like sports clothes—“there was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings.” As she leaves Nick, her brown hand waves “a jaunty salute.” Both she and Daisy are described like the curtains: their white dresses are “rippling and fluttering.” Daisy’s low, thrilling voice, perhaps a charming power play to cause people to “lean toward her,” resurfaces often enough in the story to undoubtedly serve a literary purpose. “The exhilarating ripple of her voice was a wild tonic in the rain” to Gatsby when they were reunited. Even in girlhood, “something in that voice of hers” had compelled those around her. Similar references in subsequent chapters reinforce these descriptions.

The images which portray setting are no less picturesque and permanent than those which characterize. Compare, for example, the descriptions of the two houses: Gatsby’s estate and the Buchanans’ “cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion.” Gatsby’s “enormous house,” which makes Nick’s bungalow look like “an eyesore,” is a “factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side covered by a “thin beard of raw ivy.” It is located on 40 acres of lawn and garden; it has “halls and salons and verandas” and a “high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak,” probably transported complete from some ruin overseas. It is a “feudal silhouette against the sky,” a kind of period piece, harkening back to the past. By contrast, Tom and Daisy’s place gleams with brightness, the lawn starting at the beach and running toward the front door “for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens.” Through such metaphors as “thin *beard* of raw ivy” and personification of the lawn leaping over sundials, Fitzgerald creates poetic, picturesque images which vivify and make permanent the prose of the novel.

Finally, the image that closes the chapter, Gatsby, trembling, standing with outstretched arms, looking at the blinking green light at the end of a dock, takes on greater significance as the work progresses. Nick understands only that this silhouette is his neighbor and that a certain mystique or mystery surrounds him. This image reinforces the dreamlike quality of this hero on a quest to attain his dream. And it is this “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” that causes Nick to see in Gatsby an “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness” that he has never seen before nor is he likely to see again. Ironically, this final scene in chapter 1 provides transition and contrast to the first paragraphs of chapter 2—well-manicured lawns and the pristine water of the bay are jarringly juxtaposed with the squalor and foul river running through the

Valley of Ashes, a most significant and deft contrast between dream and reality.

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

New Characters

George Wilson: Myrtle's husband; owner of an automobile repair shop where cars are also bought and sold

Myrtle Wilson: George's wife and Tom's mistress; in her middle 30s and "faintly stout"

Catherine: Myrtle's sister; "a slender, worldly girl of about thirty, with a solid sticky bob of red hair" who functions as Nick's companion at Myrtle's request

Mr. & Mrs. McKee: a couple who live in the hotel where Tom, Myrtle, and Nick go for a party

Summary

Tom invites Nick to go to the city with him. They pass through the Valley of Ashes, "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens." The area which holds the ashes of cars and trains is bounded by a "small foul river." Hovering over the Valley of Ashes is the long-forgotten billboard of an oculist, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the eyes "dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain," brooding "over the solemn dumping ground." Enormous spectacles "pass over a non-existent nose."

Tom and Nick arrive at the auto garage of George Wilson. Wilson and Tom exchange comments about a car Tom may sell. Tom arranges for Wilson's wife Myrtle to take the next train to New York for a romantic tryst.

In town Myrtle purchases a gossip magazine, some beauty aids, and a dog. She changes clothes at the apartment, putting on a dress Tom has provided, and reappears in "panting vitality." When Myrtle's sister Catherine asks Nick about Gatsby, having ascertained that Nick lives on West Egg, she repeats some of the rumors that are circulating about him. Additionally, she brings up the explanation of her sister's relationship with Tom; of Daisy, she explains, "She's a Catholic, and they don't believe in divorce." Nick knows Daisy is not Catholic. Myrtle explains her disdain for George, who is not "fit to lick" her shoe. The fine clothes of Tom had at first attracted her—she could not keep her eyes off him. However, when Myrtle speaks of Daisy to Tom, he reprimands her, saying she has no right to "mention Daisy's name." When she persists, Tom unemotionally strikes her, one deft blow breaking her nose.

Nick admits to having been drunk just twice in his life, the second time being that afternoon. Like all the other guests, he too is drunk. What he reads is distorted—it makes no sense to him. An observer of the action, and to some extent a participant, Nick decides he is both "within and without" that hotel room, "simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life." He finds himself in Pennsylvania Station, waiting for the four o'clock train.

Analysis

The Valley of Ashes, like T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland*, published in 1922 conveys the concept of America's wasted opportunities. This contrast of settings is tantamount to understanding Fitzgerald's theme, a poetic criticism concerning America's opportunities and the mess we have made of our golden age, a message Fitzgerald communicates in a subtle but effective manner.

Placing the description of the Valley of Ashes immediately after the description of the green light at the end of Chapter 1 provides a stark contrast. That juxtaposition of the color images—green with gray—highlights the theme of waste. The green of life and growth has been turned to waste through industrialization. Motorcars and trains, great advancements in industrialization have, nevertheless, left debris behind. As it turns out, the

light at the end of Daisy's dock represents wasted moral fiber, too. She is not a paragon of virtue. Like others of the idle rich on East Egg, Fitzgerald implies, she is tainted by self-love, by opulence, and by a hedonistic lifestyle.

Interestingly, the valley is described in farming or agrarian terms: "a fantastic *farm* where ashes *grow like wheat* into ridges and hills and *grotesque gardens*," and "ash-gray men" appear with "*leaden spades*." Irony derives from the association of waste with the green light and of growth with the gray Valley of Ashes.

Camouflaging the Valley of Ashes, gray in all the descriptive phrases, is a "low whitewashed railroad fence," and "the only building in sight was a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land." This very direct reference to Eliot's *The Wasteland* underscores Fitzgerald's theme—we have wasted our vitality in pursuit of a materialism that does not satisfy. George Wilson, a pale spiritless man veiled with "white ashen dust," wiping his hands on a "piece of waste," embodies that effete pursuit and, perhaps, represents Everyman. He may not have pulled himself up by the bootstraps, but he maintains a gleam of hope in "his light blue eyes."

Immediately introduced is the symbolic billboard of the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, "looking out of no face" over a "nonexistent nose." Through the description emphasizing his "eternal blindness," the narrator seems to describe some kind of god looking with a vacant stare as he describes the oculist who forgot his practice and moved away. That the eyes *brood* over the "solemn dumping ground" gives credibility to that symbolism. The God who allowed men to discover the New World has now ostensibly turned His back, His absence as unnoticed as Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's.

Ironically, Nick expects to see "a great flock of white sheep"—another farm or pastoral image—turn the corner near the hotel, and he describes the West Hundreds as "one slice in a long white cake of apartment houses," a description similar to the "frosted wedding-cake" ceiling in the description of the Buchanans' home in chapter 1. However, after witnessing the goings-on of the afternoon, he philosophically decides that the "line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets": He was "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life." So white continues to be inverted or insubstantial, unreal; the yellow or gold associated with money, at least marginally perverse; the gray, desolate and decadent. The pastels, too, seem insubstantial and dreamlike. Things are not always what they appear to be.

Clothes and personal appearance are all-important in this presentation of the American Dream. Myrtle is transformed when she dons the outfits Tom provides for her; "hauteur" replaces or enhances her vitality. Ironically, when Mrs. McKee compliments the dress, she remarks, "It's just a crazy old thing" which she slips on when she does not care what she looks like. Additionally, it was Tom's clothes that first attracted her to him. He "had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes," and she admits she could not keep her eyes off him, his white shirt-front pressing against her arm. Conversely, George had to borrow the suit they were married in. Myrtle concludes he is not "fit to lick" her shoe and is so dumb "he doesn't know he's alive." Such "embarrassment" caused her to cry when the owner came to reclaim his suit.

Books and printed material are symbolic, just as clothes are. The books in Gatsby's library, acknowledged as real by a surprised Owl Eyes, nevertheless have uncut pages, suggesting pseudo-intellectualism—doing things and owning things to suggest a respectability that may not exist. Tom reads and refers to books that echo his snobbish feeling of superiority or elitism, his prejudiced attitudes. Having been "rather literary in college," Nick "had the high intention" of reading many books. Myrtle's interests run to "some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway," such as *Town Tattle*, several copies of which lie on the table in the hotel room.

The convention of "withheld information" increases the interest both of the reader and of the narrator. Like Nick, we learn of Gatsby's past piecemeal, first hearing rumors which probably have no basis in fact.

Catherine repeats the rumor she heard that “he’s a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s,” and “that’s where his money comes from.” In addition to increasing suspense, the effect of this convention is to make Gatsby a type of god or demigod. In archetypal stories, the hero has a mysterious origin, often coming from the water, and a mysterious past. In between birth and death is an enigmatic, almost supernatural, life. Gatsby fulfills this myth in several different ways. He evolves and takes shape gradually, initially through unverifiable stories. As Nick pieces together such stories, he gains insight into Gatsby’s background. The reader, too, gradually learns about this self-made man. Clearly, Gatsby’s background is largely unknown, fodder for speculation. Nick, and the reader through Nick, continues to experience ambivalence toward Gatsby. Ironically, he epitomizes the American Dream, but he is an unworthy symbol.

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

New Characters

Gatsby’s chauffeur: in a uniform of “ robin’s-egg blue,” he invites Nick to one of Gatsby’s parties

A pair of stage twins: two young women, unnamed, in yellow dresses

Owl Eyes: a “stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles” who has been drunk for a week, sitting in Gatsby’s library examining the books

Summary

In chapter 3, Gatsby’s parties in general, and one in particular, are described in poetic fashion. Motorboats, aquaplanes, cars—these sources of amusement appear in great numbers. Food, in vast quantities and garishly prepared, comes in every Friday; once every two weeks a “corps of caterers” transforms Gatsby’s grounds into an amusement park setting.

The guests conduct themselves “according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks.” Liquor flows freely, uninvited guests stay virtually all night, and fights are rampant. The host himself never participates: “No one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link.” Rumors therefore emerge about him. Not knowing the facts, perhaps, the guests speculate on his business, his war experience, and his past. One visitor who at a previous party had torn a gown on a chair received from Gatsby a replacement dress—“gas blue with lavender beads.” Interestingly, she knows the price—\$265, information no doubt conveyed by the price tag’s being left on it.

On this particular Saturday night, Nick, one of the few guests actually to receive an invitation to Gatsby’s house, spends time with Jordan Baker. In Gatsby’s library he and Jordan encounter Owl Eyes, a guest who claims to have been drunk for about a week. He has discovered that Gatsby’s books are real, not *faux* cardboard. He reveals, however, that the pages have not been cut, obviously making the books impossible to read.

Finally, Nick meets someone who recognizes him from having been in the same battalion in [World War I](#) in Europe. Moments later he discovers that this man is Gatsby. Immediately, Nick is enamored of the man’s smile and romantic qualities. When Jordan breaks in, Gatsby invites her into the house, where he talks privately with her at least an hour. She asks Nick to call her later at the home of her aunt, Mrs. Sigourney Howard. Telling the guests good-bye, Gatsby invites Nick to try out his new hydroplane the next morning. However, upon leaving, Nick observes a group of people gathered around a car that has been driven into a ditch. The wheel is completely off, but the inebriated occupants of the car—Owl Eyes and another unnamed guest—want simply to call a service station for gasoline to get them on their way again.

Nick continues to study and work at his job, lunching with other accountants and dining in the evening at the Yale Club. He has a brief affair, terminated when the young lady's brother becomes somewhat hostile. In midsummer he begins to see Jordan again, at first flattered to be in the presence of this young lady golfer, then tenderly curious about her dishonesty. The story Nick had earlier tried and failed to remember now comes back to him; it concerned dishonesty in a golf tournament. Ironically, he chooses to overlook the incident, saying, "dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply," but simultaneously he very objectively assesses himself as "one of the few honest people" he has ever known. Again the moral exemplar, he acknowledges matter-of-factly that he is "full of interior rules that act as brakes" on his desires. At that moment, he determines that the honest thing for him to do is to terminate a relationship with some young lady back home, the one everyone had expected him to marry. That had to be "tactfully broken off" before he was free.

Analysis

In this chapter the narrative and literary techniques continue to function in the same ways. Color images multiply. Cars and eyes as symbols recur. Rumors contributing to the image of archetypal heroes continue. The narrative voice and tags of description resurface, enhancing and validating earlier assumptions.

Yellow predominates in the lush party setting at Gatsby's house. Gatsby's station wagon scampers "like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains" bearing guests. Glittering food offerings include "turkeys bewitched to a dark gold." The orchestra plays "yellow cocktail music," the novelist employing synaesthesia (using one sense to describe another, here a color or sight image to describe a sound or auditory image) as part of the depiction of the age. The setting is "gaudy with primary colors" and with enough "colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden." Two girls at Nick's table wear "twin yellow dresses," and Jordan rests her "slender golden arm" on Nick's.

The color is thus subtly associated with luxury, opulence, and hedonism—the essence of the 1920s. Paradoxically, yellow is also the color of decay, of decadence. Coalescing with yellow images are pastels: Gatsby's chauffeur comes "in a uniform of robin's-egg blue" to invite Nick to the party, and the replacement evening gown is "gas blue with lavender beads." The "little villages in France" are "gray" in Gatsby's memory. The accented colors and their images convey themes no less effectively than symbols.

Probably the dominant symbol, perhaps equally important as the green light, is the automobile, the most symptomatic of the age. In addition to Gatsby's yellow station wagon, his Rolls-Royce becomes an "omnibus," bearing guests to and from the city. Cars at the party are "parked five deep in the drive." The one in which Owl Eyes was a passenger is a "new coupé" with the wheel detached. The very drunk guest insists he was not driving, that he knows next to nothing about driving. This accident seems to foreshadow the later one when Daisy is driving the "death car" which kills Myrtle. Another automobile accident involved Tom and a chambermaid at the Santa Barbara hotel where he and Daisy were staying three months after they were married. He "ran into a wagon on the Ventura road" and "ripped a front wheel off his car." Additionally, Jordan leaves a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down. Thus, the driving society, the recklessness with people's lives and morals, parallels the theme concerning wasted potential and wasted goodness.

The drunken Owl Eyes also seems to repeat the message of the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. The emphasis on eyes, later equated by George with the eyes of God, unites with the message hinted at through automobiles. Part of the picture—both of the 1920s and of Nick's exposure to high society—is the consumption of liquor. At this particular party, "the bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden." Champagne is "served in glasses bigger than finger bowls." Still, although the bar is crowded, "Gatsby was not there." The fact that he does not drink sets him apart from guests like Owl Eyes who boasts of having been drunk "for about a week now." Prohibition, the law of the land, is ignored. Yet, rumors, undoubtedly to some extent based on fact, picture Gatsby as a bootlegger. To provide the liquor is as immoral as drinking it during prohibition.

This picture of the Jazz Age in chapter 3 includes references to women's hair dyed and "shorn in strange new ways," to new dances, and to music—"by seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums." As the evening wanes, the moon rises higher, and "floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn." Old men danced with "flappers," pushing young girls "backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably and keeping in the corners." Finally, "the *Jazz History of the World*," Vladimir Tostoff's composition, is over. Replacing the music is "the caterwauling horns" of the cars leaving the party. As the horns "reached a crescendo," Nick observes Gatsby raising his hand in "a formal gesture of farewell." *Caterwauling*, or making the shrill sound of a cat's cry, recurs repeatedly in the description of horns—both automobile horns and saxophones—creating a lasting auditory image. This wail becomes synonymous with the Jazz Age. Such a vivid portrayal defines the "objective correlative," T. S. Eliot's term to describe "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion." Therefore, when the "external facts" terminate in "sensory experience," an emotion is immediately evoked. Hence, when the caterwauling sound recurs, the reader is transported mentally and vicariously to the Jazz Age, during which such sounds were common.

Rumors continue to swirl about Gatsby. One of the girls in yellow shares the story she has heard: "Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once." Another argues, "It's more that he was a German spy during the war," and so those who "found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world" speculate about the whispers concerning Gatsby. Nick can accept more readily that Gatsby "sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York" than that he drifted "coolly out of nowhere" and bought a palace on Long Island Sound. Ironically, he is closer to the truth than anyone else.

The narrative voice of Nick enables the reader to flesh out and interpret the tags used to describe the characters. Gatsby's repeated use of "Old Sport" and his rare smile, Jordan's "jauntiness" and her seeming to balance something on her chin, Nick's total candor in suspecting himself of possessing "at least one of the cardinal virtues," his being honest—these tags serve the purposes of characterizing, of lending validity to descriptions, and of continuing to develop theme. Finally, the picture of the partygoers presents a tawdry picture of America at play.

Irony more noticeably appears in the party scene. Early in the chapter the description of the party, buffet tables "garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs," evokes Petronius' *Satyricon* from the early classical literature of Rome. Trimalchio, the ostentatious hero of this ancient satire, also *nouveau riche*, provides such a colossal banquet. Eventually, Fitzgerald writes of Gatsby, his career "as Trimalchio was over." Such an allusion lends credibility to the belief that Fitzgerald did intend the novel as a type of satire; indeed, in a letter to his publisher in November of 1924, he wrote that he had decided to name his novel *Trimalchio in West Egg*. Paradox or irony appears, also, in Jordan's observations, one of which she makes in her assessment of Gatsby's party. She likes large parties because "they're so intimate"; she explains, "At small parties there isn't any privacy." Additional comments later in the novel reinforce her incongruous, ironic observations about life.

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

New Character

Meyer Wolfsheim: a business connection of Gatsby's

Summary

Another party takes place at Gatsby's mansion, this time on a Sunday morning. The narrator crowds an artist's canvas with his description of the guests, every possible type included, and thus creates vignettes of

the time period. The chapter begins with a lengthy description of the guests, and it concludes, much as a periodic sentence does, with the summary: "All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer." Nick records their names on a railroad timetable dated July 5, 1922. Young ladies at the party continue, even while guests of Gatsby, to whisper rumors about their host. All come to gamble and to drink, both illicit activities of the day. Yet no one is concerned about illegality.

One morning in late July, Gatsby unexpectedly picks up Nick for a drive to the city, his car a rich cream color, his suit caramel-colored. Inexplicably, he begins to reveal some of his story, swearing to tell Nick "God's truth." Born to wealthy parents in the Middle West—all deceased now—he had been educated at Oxford and, after inheriting his family's wealth, had lived "like a young rajah" in Paris, Venice, and Rome, collecting rubies, dabbling in hunting, painting, trying to forget a sad experience, one of which he promises to share with Nick that afternoon. Because of this trauma, he wanted to die in the war, yet seemingly he bore "an enchanted life." He fought bravely and was promoted to major. He was eventually decorated for valor in war, including service rendered in Montenegro.

Speeding along, Gatsby's car is stopped by a policeman who, when Gatsby displays a white card from the commissioner, apologizes. Obviously, Gatsby had once "befriended" the commissioner, and the city official is indebted. A hearse and a limousine pass them as they proceed to the city. In a cellar restaurant on 42nd Street, Nick is introduced to Meyer Wolfsheim, a racketeer, who offers him a business "gonnection." Almost in the same breath he reminisces about a former "gonnection," Rosy Rosenthal, who had been gunned down, ostensibly by underworld connections. Gatsby prepares Nick for a meeting with Jordan, a plan established at Gatsby's earlier party, to accommodate a rendezvous with Daisy. When Tom appears in the same restaurant, Nick goes over to speak with him and to introduce Gatsby; but when he turns, Gatsby has disappeared.

That afternoon, Jordan recalls with nostalgia her 1917 friendship in Louisville with Daisy. Popular with young officers from Camp Taylor, Daisy had also spent some time with Gatsby, who, as a result, planned to marry her. Prevented by her mother from going to New York to say good-bye to him when he shipped out, she shortly thereafter met and married Tom Buchanan, whose \$350,000 pearl necklace apparently surpassed the love she might have had for Gatsby.

Jordan, a bridesmaid in the wedding, fills in the details for Nick: after a three months' honeymoon to the South Seas, Tom was already having extramarital affairs. The next April Daisy had a daughter, Pammy. Despite moving with "a fast crowd," Daisy maintained a sterling reputation, perhaps "because she doesn't drink." Until six weeks before, she had not heard Gatsby's name again. By contrast, Gatsby had searched newspapers, hoping to catch "a glimpse of Daisy's name." Nick responds sympathetically to Jordan's account and agrees to provide his home as a place for Gatsby and Daisy to be reunited. A phrase begins to beat in his ears: "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired." Gratified to have beside him a person, not a "disembodied face" such as compelled Gatsby, Nick draws Jordan up closer, tightening his arms. Her "wan, scornful mouth" smiles, and so he draws her up again "closer," this time to his face.

Analysis

The same subjects and devices continue to develop in chapter 4. References appear early in the chapter to bootlegging and illicit sexual liaisons, even in the descriptions of the myriad of guests who came to Gatsby's, perceived by the narrator as "the world and its mistress." At least hinting of some criminal activity about to come to light is the reference to Henry L. Palmetto, one of Gatsby's guests who "killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square." A state senator participates in the bash even though prohibition was the law of the land. In listing guests from every social stratum, Nick, perhaps unwittingly, makes the point that society in general is corrupt. Everyone has a price. As the policeman rescinds the speeding ticket because of some connection with Gatsby, it seems clear that the commissioner can be bought. As Gatsby's grail begins to take shape in sordid reality, it seems clear that *anyone* can be bought. Where Myrtle can be bought with a simple dog collar, Daisy can be bought with a \$350,000 pearl necklace. Entrepreneurs could

pander to such tastes. Staggering as the idea is to Nick, even the 1919 World Series was “fixed,” according to Gatsby, the work of one man—Meyer Wolfsheim.

More noticeable in this chapter are flower images. From the outset, of course, Daisy and Myrtle, as names of principal characters, subtly call attention to flowers, a daisy being a white flower with yellow at the center and myrtle, a shrub with white flowers and dark berries. Daisy calls Nick “a rose, an absolute rose” in chapter 1. In chapter 4, we meet Benny McClenahan’s female friends; he brings four girls to Gatsby’s parties, their last names either “the melodious names of flowers and months or the sterner ones of the great American capitalists”—an interesting juxtaposition of flowers and money. The dead man who passes in a hearse is “heaped with blooms” to conceal the death beneath. At Daisy’s Louisville home, her family has “the largest of the lawns.” Nature, particularly gardens and flowers, is ever important with the suggestions, archetypal as they are, of birth and death in nature, of the cycle of life.

Cars in this chapter become increasingly important. Gatsby’s car, described like a god’s chariot, is a “rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns.” Riding in it is like “sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory.” The diction emphasizes the mythological association, “labyrinth” suggesting the story in mythology of the minotaur, the windshields mirroring a dozen suns suggestive of Apollo, god of light, or Icarus, who flew too near the sun. Going through the Valley of Ashes, Gatsby’s car has its “fenders spread like wings,” another image which reinforces the demigod or godlike image. Ironically, Daisy drove a little white roadster, always preferring white, even at 18; equally ironic, the white pearls valued at \$350,000 determined her choice of marriage partner. The return from the wedding trip finds Tom with a chambermaid in his car on the road to Ventura—he “ripped a front wheel off his car,” an experience much like Owl Eyes’ earlier mishap. Even a hearse and a limousine are included in the exhibition of automobiles. The physically dead and the morally dying, the respectable and the less-than-respectable, come together both literally and thematically.

The objective correlative and the archetype appear here, as well. The song being sung by little girls in Central Park is “The Sheik of Araby,” the lyrics of which tell of the sheik’s creeping into the tent where the maiden is sleeping. Such songs evoke in the reader familiar with the melody or lyrics of this 1920s song a nostalgic reaction. Hearing the song even in imagination recalls the lifestyles, the dances, the appearance typical of the 1920s. Gatsby’s car has a “three-noted horn,” perhaps suggestive of a flourish of trumpets before the appearance of royalty.

The rumors about Gatsby persist in this chapter; even Gatsby is aware of them, a situation he tries to dispel by telling Nick his story, or the story as he wishes it were, believes that it was. Even he believes he has led a charmed life. Like a supernatural hero, a hero with mythical powers, he has survived war, rejection, unrequited love; now he believes he can recapture and relive the past. The music, the bootlegged alcohol, the cars, the freedom females experienced—all of these contribute to the subliminal effect of the objective correlative. And for Nick, at least, Gatsby comes alive as the romantic American hero, “delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor.”

The drunk scene in which Daisy destroys a letter from Gatsby and then marries Tom the next day is central to understanding the irony of the novel. Although Daisy does not drink, the night she receives the note from Gatsby she drinks herself into a stupor; and after sobering up in a tub and succumbing to the influence of her mother, she decides to abandon Gatsby and marry Tom. Crucial to understanding the importance of this scene is the conventional resolution of the conflict between love and money. In the Horatio Alger stories, in rags-to-riches narratives, love wins out over money. In this instance, however, money wins. Daisy “sells out” without a shiver. Jordan speculates that “perhaps Daisy never went in for amour at all.” Just as Myrtle “sells out” to have an affair with Tom, Daisy, in a higher caste of society, sells out, it seems, in return for a \$350,000 necklace. Fitzgerald’s point seems to be that if the price is right, everyone will succumb. Thus, the

conventional motif of the American Dream is inverted. If the end is acquisition of money, any means is justified.

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

New Character

Klipspringer: the boarder at Gatsby's house

Summary

Nick returns home at 2:00 in the morning to find Gatsby's house lit up "like the World's Fair." Gatsby is anxious concerning the meeting Nick is to orchestrate with Daisy, a long-awaited reunion. He invites Nick to go to Coney Island in his car or "take a plunge in the swimming pool," but his neighbor, who must work the next day, demurs, saying it's too late—he has to go to bed. This invitation to swim foreshadows the eventual demise of Gatsby.

Knowing or strongly suspicioning Nick's meager circumstances, Gatsby offers to "set him up in business"—it wouldn't take up much time, but he "might pick up a nice bit of money"—but then refuses to answer queries about the nature of the business, explaining it's "a rather confidential sort of thing." On the day agreed upon, Gatsby sends over a greenhouse of flowers and a tea service. At two minutes before the appointed time, he despairs and decides to go home. He decides that Daisy is not coming.

Of course, he is wrong. Awkward, difficult in many ways, the reunion reignites Daisy's fervor for Gatsby. When he reclines against the mantelpiece "in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom," he knocks a "defunct" clock off. Gatsby apologizes, saying, "I'm sorry about the clock." Nick assures him it is an old clock, a comment followed immediately by Daisy's saying, "We haven't met for many years," and Gatsby's replying, "Five years next November."

Together with Nick and Gatsby, she tours Gatsby's house, pausing to examine piles of shirts from Gatsby's closet. Daisy cries. Inadvertent comments and interrupting telephone calls inform Nick of Gatsby's business activities. When Nick asks Gatsby what business he is in, he impulsively retorts, "That's my affair." A picture of Dan Cody elicits an explanation of Cody's part in Gatsby's career. The clipped responses to one phone call—"I said a *small* town.... He must know what a small town is.... Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town"—are consistent with speculation and Gatsby's own comments about his being in the "drug business," possibly, as Tom will charge later, a front for bootlegging "grain alcohol" over the counter. Klipspringer, the "boarder," plays the piano at Gatsby's insistence; the songs he plays are "Ain't We Got Fun" and "The Love Nest." When Daisy calls Gatsby to look at the clouds following the rain, it is clear that he is bewildered, awestruck again by Daisy's voice, that voice, like the Sirens' of mythology, "a deathless song." Nick slips away down the marble steps, "leaving them there together."

Analysis

As the chapter begins, Gatsby realizes he is closer to attaining his dream, Daisy, than he has been for five years. Anxious and edgy, he admits to "a little business on the side," thinking Nick might want a "piece of the action." Gatsby now sees everything—his wardrobe, his furnishings, his home—through Daisy's eyes, and, understandably, wonders about their acceptability to her. Everything he has done, everything he has accumulated clearly is for her.

At Nick's bungalow, Gatsby is reunited with Daisy. The scene reiterates a sort of death of time. Like a child counting the days until Christmas, Gatsby has counted the days before he could start life over with Daisy. Gatsby cannot be convinced that it is impossible to repeat the past; it is crucial to him that he and Daisy be able to go back to their Louisville relationship. Because Gatsby now has the fortune he lacked before, Daisy

can choose him, as she had chosen Tom for the same motivation before, and enjoy both love and affluence. Gatsby is haunted by time, and the references to it both here and in other chapters emphasize the angst he experiences and has experienced for five years. Strongly contributing to this theme of repeating the past, or at least attempting to, is Fitzgerald's manipulation of time. The novel does not develop sequentially and in a straightforward manner; rather, the reader sees and learns through Nick's eyes. The result is empathy with Gatsby and his idealism.

Both at the initial reunion and at the tossing into the air of Gatsby's shirts, Daisy cries. Moved by the show of prosperity, the dream girl responds as Gatsby would wish. This show of maudlin sentimentality parallels Myrtle's tearful response to returning George's borrowed wedding suit to its owner. It is unlike Gatsby to display wealth and possessions so ostentatiously. He continues to react and evaluate through Daisy's "well-loved" eyes.

Almost subconsciously, Gatsby admits his long pursuit of Daisy. He matter-of-factly states that she has a green light "that burns all night" at the end of her dock. Absorbed in the significance of that observation, he tacitly acknowledges that "the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever," for the real Daisy, in contrast to the idealized Daisy, is no longer an "enchanted object." The enchantment had become his total being, had consumed him—no human could have measured up. Daisy must have "tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion." Daisy's voice once again endears her: it is "a wild tonic in the rain" but at the same time, like the song of the sirens, it lures Gatsby to final destruction. Her voice "was a deathless song."

At the birth and passing and during the adventures of a mythic hero, the primitive elements—earth, air, fire, and water—appear. Again, Gatsby fits the mold. His created identity began with his introduction to high living through Dan Cody, a debauchee whose yacht provided for Gatsby the conveyance that transcended earth over water, just as Lancelot ascended to Heaven over water and bridges in Arthurian legend. On the day of this delayed epiphany, nature provides rain off and on throughout the day and into the night. And "no amount of fire," the narrator suggests, can threaten "what a man will store up in his ghostly heart." The "fluctuating, feverish warmth" of Daisy's voice helps provide the element of fire in Gatsby's experience. The macrocosm—the universe—was made from these four primitive elements. The microcosm—man—has them in him as well: from dust he was created, according to Genesis; his breathing and sighs constitute air in the body; temper and passion replicate fire in the macrocosm; and the blood flowing through the veins corresponds to the rivers in the universe. All the elements create the archetypal hero image in Gatsby.

Recurring motifs function in this chapter as well as before. Colors are regal: Gatsby's silver shirt and gold-colored tie, Daisy's brass buttons gleaming on her dress, Gatsby's toilet set of "pure dull gold," and "golden billow of foamy clouds above the sea." Shirts with "stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue" and Daisy's "three-cornered lavender hat" expand the palette to include pastels. The flowers are lilacs, "dripping bare," the bedrooms "swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers." Observing the clouds after the rain, Daisy whispers she wants to "get one of those pink clouds" and put Gatsby in it to push him around.

Music appears here in the form of Klipspringer's piano playing. He plays several tunes, including "Ain't We Got Fun" and "The Love Nest." The objective correlative includes these tunes and dances reflective of the Age of Flappers and Jazz.

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Summary

About this time, suspicions concerning Gatsby grow to such an extent that an "ambitious young reporter"

attempts to get a statement from Gatsby or some story about this mysterious man's notoriety. Stories circulating have to do with an "underground pipe-line to Canada." As a result of such rumors, Nick chooses, at this point in the flashback, to detail Gatsby's younger years, stories not recounted in chronological order.

Not people of means, as Gatsby had earlier told Nick, Gatsby's parents were "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people"; in truth, he had never accepted them as his parents at all but saw himself as a son of God: he sprang from "his Platonic conception of himself." He created an image, a persona which he wanted to become and set out to accomplish it. Along the way, by his own admission, he had taken advantage of "young virgins because they were ignorant" and of "others because they were hysterical about things" he took for granted.

At the age of 17, James Gatz, more or less a "beach bum," was introduced to an exciting career, a Bohemian life, at the invitation of Dan Cody. Cody had taken in the young Gatz, as Meyer Wolfsheim would do later, probably because of his winsome smile. Cody, at 50, was "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five." A "pioneer debauchee," he had "brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon." As a result of seeing the trouble created by Cody's drunkenness while serving in his employ, Gatsby drank little. As a mentor, Cody was flawed.

After this flashback digression to account for Gatsby's outlook, a group of three on horseback—"Tom and a man named Sloane and a pretty woman in a brown riding habit"—come by Gatsby's house; they casually and insincerely invite Nick and Gatsby to join them for a ride and dinner. Nick excuses himself; Gatsby prepares to join them by car since he has no horse. Gatsby does not know he is being insulted. In the meantime, Gatsby mentions, almost aggressively, that he has known Tom's wife before, a comment which creates questions in Tom's mind. The following Saturday Tom accompanies Daisy to Gatsby's party. Nick notices a different, oppressive atmosphere, simply because Tom is present. Tom is contemptuous of the party—of the guests, of the host, of Daisy's desire to be there. He accuses Gatsby and his guests of being bootleggers, an accusation Daisy refutes. She insists that Gatsby simply owns drug stores. Yet, except for the "moving-picture director and his Star," even Daisy is "appalled" by the "raw vigor" of West Egg. Two worlds collide in this situation.

After the party, Gatsby makes clear to Nick he plans to relive the past; he expects Daisy to renounce her marriage and love for Tom and return to that moment of commitment, as he understood his and Daisy's relationship, in Louisville five years earlier. He is incredulous when Nick argues that no one can repeat the past. Of course you can, he argues. This is the idealism of youth. Gatsby wants to recover "something, some idea of himself" as a young military officer in uniform. Returning in his mind's eye to Daisy's street, he sees that the blocks of the sidewalks really form a ladder, and so he "mounted to a secret place above the trees" where he could "suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder." At the moment he kisses Daisy, however, his unutterable vision is fleshed out, incarnated, and thus his mind can never "romp again like the mind of God." The intangible became tangible; divinity became flesh. Though she blossomed for him at the kiss, the limitation imposed by the kiss is irreversible. The chapter ends with Nick's struggling to remember a phrase, a "fragment of lost words," that he had heard "somewhere a long time ago." Unable to remember, his lips make no sound, and what he had "almost remembered was uncommunicable forever."

Analysis

Perhaps the phrase Nick tries to recall is the same one that Fitzgerald wrote about in another work: "France was a land; England was a people, but America, having about it that quality of the ideal, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart."

As Gatsby became the new identity, the Platonic conception of himself, he envisioned himself achieving that uncorrupted vision toward which he had worked all these years. Ironically, the means to that end were corrupt,

financial schemes espoused by Gatsby, ostensibly because of Cody and Wolfsheim's influence initially. His belief centered on "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." Material values are inextricably bound up with dreams. To that belief he gave unstintingly of himself. Thus, Nick concludes that, though Gatsby "represented everything for which he had unaffected scorn," there was "something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life." His "extraordinary gift for hope," the likes of which Nick had never found in any other person, convinces him that Gatsby turned out all right in the end. It was the "foul dust" that "floated in the wake of his dreams" that caused his demise.

Seemingly, Gatsby never really accepted his mother and his father in North Dakota as his parents. As Nick earlier observed, he could have sprung from the swamps of Louisiana—or any other mysterious origin. As heroes in the archetypal mold do, he came from mystical, mysterious beginnings. His parents might just as well have found him abandoned, a foundling, on a mountainside where Oedipus was abandoned and found. He continues to grow into the archetypal image. Part of his enigma, his charisma, is the smile, one which he acquired early on: he learned that "people liked him when he smiled." Surely, Wolfsheim was enamored of that smile, and so Gatsby was a very desirable and subsequently successful "front man."

Motifs which recur in this chapter include color imagery, Daisy's voice tag, and subliminal music as objective correlative. "Gray" surfaces again in association with decadence or decay. The "pioneer debauchee" Dan Cody is described as a "gray, florid man" with a hard empty face. Daisy's fur collar, a "gray haze," stirs in the breeze. She whispers to Nick at the party to present a *green* card for a kiss in return; she offers Tom a little *gold* pencil to write down addresses of anyone who might appeal to him. She facetiously identifies a guest as the man "with the sort of *blue* nose." Gatsby points out to Daisy a gorgeous guest, an *orchid* of a woman sitting under a *white*-plum tree. Thus, colors continue to add to the same thematic tapestry as they have done in previous sections.

Again in this chapter, Daisy's voice plays "murmurous tricks in her throat," and she begins to sing "in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again." One of the songs is "Three O'Clock in the Morning."

Gatsby is ever closer to his dream and to its fulfillment. He argues emphatically that he can go back to the Louisville scenario of five years before and simply pick up where he and Daisy left off. Now, having amassed a fortune, conceivably one greater than Tom's, he fully believes Daisy will prefer him, will renounce Tom, and will marry him. Where before he had only his military uniform, now he has "a man in England" who buys his clothes, sending over "a selection of things at the beginning of each season." He displays shirts of every fabric and description—"of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel." He can indeed provide for Daisy in the manner to which she is accustomed. Ever the dreamer, he cannot possibly imagine that she will refuse.

The imagery is almost Biblical: his mind can never "romp again like the mind of God" if he weds his "unutterable visions to her perishable breath." When he kisses her, "the incarnation," a term associated with epiphany, God in flesh revealed to man, is complete. In this context, Gatsby, reminiscent of Faust who makes a bargain with the devil, sacrifices divine characteristics for fleshly, sensual desires.

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

New Character

Michaelis: friend and comforter of George

Summary

As curiosity peaks concerning Gatsby, the lights fail to go on one Saturday night. Visitors in automobiles stay a few minutes and leave. When Nick inquires about Gatsby's welfare, the "butler" allays his concerns. The

next day Gatsby explains he has dismissed his servants in order to protect Daisy's reputation when she comes to visit him in the afternoons. He extends an invitation to Nick to join him and Jordan Baker for lunch at the Buchanans' the next day. Unbearably hot, the train and the passengers on it emit signals and warnings of temper and passion corresponding to the intense heat of the summertime. The situation on the train foreshadows the incident later in New York City in the hotel room.

At the Buchanans' house, Gatsby sees Pammy for the first time—a living, tangible result of the marriage Gatsby has been unwilling to accept. Then, despairing from boredom and unrelieved heat, Daisy suggests they go to town. Tom insidiously responds by “suggesting” that he take Jordan and Nick in Gatsby's “circus wagon,” and that Gatsby take Daisy in Tom's coupé. At the garage in the Valley of Ashes, Tom stops for gasoline, promises to sell George a car which he can then resell for profit, and hears George say he has decided to take Myrtle away. George explains they want to go West, partly because he has just learned of “something funny” going on in Myrtle's life. Suddenly, Nick becomes aware of eyes watching, not just those of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg but of Myrtle as she observes the scene from the upstairs window; he discerns from her facial expression that she believes Jordan to be Tom's wife.

In the Plaza Hotel, nothing relieves the heat—open windows, cool drinks, or relaxation. To the sounds of the wedding march from below where someone's wedding nuptials are taking place, sounds of discord between Daisy and Tom appear. When Tom begins to interrogate Gatsby about his past and his business dealings, Gatsby rises to the occasion, thus justifying Nick's confidence in him. But when Gatsby tries to force Daisy's hand, proclaiming to Tom that she had never loved him, emotions erupt. Tom calls Gatsby a swindler, a racketeer, a bootlegger, at which point Daisy begins to draw “further and further into herself.” Tom instructs Daisy to start home in Gatsby's car; the others will follow. Nick suddenly remembers this is his thirtieth birthday, a significant entrance into a world of “loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”

Following a space which indicates a hiatus or gap in the chronological account, Nick explains that Michaelis has come over to try to comfort Wilson. In the continuing flashback, it becomes clear that Myrtle had run out into the dark toward “a big yellow car,” a “death car,” and that the car hit and killed Myrtle and then drove on without stopping. George grieves uncontrollably as witnesses describe what happened. Tom stops the car he is driving to ascertain what happened. Naturally he assumes Gatsby had killed Myrtle and, in cowardly fashion, had driven on.

Outside the Buchanans' house, Gatsby waits to protect Daisy from any danger that might erupt. Nick, at first contemptuous of Gatsby's apparent carelessness and callousness, discovers through an inadvertent slip in Gatsby's conversation, that Daisy had been driving the “death car.” However, Gatsby will say he was. Unappreciative of his self-sacrificing protection of her, Daisy sits with Tom at a table of cold fried chicken and bottles of ale, preparing her safe retreat back into the insulated protection of the secret society. So Nick walks away to a waiting taxi and watches Gatsby stand “in the moonlight—watching over nothing.”

Analysis

A satiric reference appears at the beginning of chapter 7, when Gatsby is described in the image of Trimalchio, the protagonist in Petronius' *Satyricon*. The giver of lavish parties now hosts only romantic trysts with Daisy. Hence, the need for servants no longer exists, and some of Wolfsheim's acquaintances take over the tasks previously held by servants. The whole “caravansary,” or staff of servants, has fallen down like a house of cards “at the disapproval in her eyes.” For such an affair, servants may be released. The diction choice of “caravansary,” an inn for caravans in Persia, furthers the image of the rich, indulgent Trimalchio and reinforces the satiric intent of the reference. Tutored and coached by corrupt mentors, Gatsby's ethereal dream had unwittingly become tainted.

Another recurring image in this section is heat. The weather is relentlessly hot. On the train to the Buchanans' for lunch, Nick observes that this particular day is "the warmest day of the summer": it was "broiling." Straw seats "hovered on the edge of combustion," and the woman sitting next to him "lapsed despairingly into deep heat with a desolate cry." The conductor complains about the heat, an observation Nick follows with the fragmented and sardonic commentary, "That any one should care in this heat whose flushed lips he kissed, whose head made damp the pajama pocket over his heart!" Stated overtly is the association between the heat of the summer in the macrocosm and the heat of passion in the microcosm, an emphasis which continues in the action of this chapter. The physical heat of the sweltering last day of summer is no more intense than the fiery emotions—temper, passion, jealousy—of the characters. Ironically, both Jordan and Daisy look cool, as does Pammy, who comes in to be exhibited for the guests. Jordan reacts to Daisy's cynical boredom, exhorting her not to be morbid and wryly suggesting that "life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall," an atypical, inverted description of the archetypal fall of the year.

Bored, but, ironically, on the verge of the most intense, demanding crisis of her life, Daisy asks, "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon and the day after that, and the next thirty years?" This rather existential assessment of life replicates or at least echoes the sentiment in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a poem which influenced Fitzgerald significantly. She vacantly points out that Gatsby looks self-assured and cool even in his suit, a marked contrast with the rest of the scene. When Nick mentions Daisy's indiscreet voice, Gatsby matter-of-factly returns, it's "full of money." In this observation the tag Fitzgerald repeatedly uses in his identification of Daisy—her low voice—unites with the motivating force in her life, money, seemingly a motivation Gatsby has quietly understood and accepted.

Cars are exceedingly important in this chapter. That Daisy openly prefers riding with Gatsby shocks and appalls Tom, but he acquiesces, insisting that they drive his coupé while he, together with Nick and Jordan, will drive Gatsby's yellow open car with standard shift. When they stop for gas at George's garage, Myrtle sees from the upper window and assumes that Jordan, riding with Tom, is his wife. Cynically, Tom allows George to think he can buy Gatsby's car; he is, thus, led to believe that the car belongs to Tom. While there, Gatsby and Daisy speed by in the blue coupé, and the threesome hurry along "toward Astoria at fifty miles an hour" to catch up with the "easy-going" blue coupé. On the return trip, however, Daisy and Gatsby drive the big yellow car, "the 'death car' as the newspapers called it," a fact that leads George ultimately to seek information from Tom about the owner/driver. Nick's statement, "So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight," expresses not just the literal truth of the experience but the thematic point as well—the car, a symbol of the driving quality, the recklessness of these people. They could destroy the lives of others and then simply retreat into their money.

The images of cars also reflect the restless, driving nature of the characters. This restless, driving nature appears tangibly in the repeated images of cars. To notice the kind of car the characters drive is to perceive his or her character. Nick's "old Dodge" is the first of such automobiles mentioned. Daisy drives a white roadster; Gatsby, one of "monstrous length" with "fenders spread like wings," a "rich cream color," the interior "a sort of green leather conservatory." Tom drives a conservative blue coupé; Jordan borrows her aunt's convertible and leaves the top down one rainy day. In George's garage is a "dust-covered wreck of a Ford." Recurring words, such as *restless*, *brooding*, and *driving*, reinforce the depiction of a restless American society in the 1920s.

In the hotel room, as Tom charges Gatsby with various criminal activities, Daisy begins her metamorphosis. Gatsby's extreme wealth starts to lose its appeal as she starts to believe Tom's accusations. Gatsby, "a common swindler," "a bootlegger," and a conspirator in some new scheme that Tom's sleuth, Walter Chase, is "afraid" to tell about, loses luster in her eyes; still, Gatsby innocently, naïvely believes Daisy will denounce Tom and her marriage to return to him and the love they had experienced five years before.

Color images again proliferate in this chapter. New York City, symbolically through cream colors, comes a little closer to the golden world and lifestyle of the rich. Gold and shades of gold—cream, caramel-colored, yellow—are dual in meaning. Clearly, they pertain to wealth and opulence, but they also associate with waste and decadence and cowardice. In this case, gold represents a sellout of America's idealism and true character, at least as it was originally perceived.

Eyes, as a pattern of imagery, are noticeable. To emphasize seeing, perceiving, understanding, Fitzgerald uses a plethora of eye images. Daisy's eyes, Gatsby fears, will reflect disapproval; in fact, they reflect fascination, at least initially. They look at Tom frowningly, yet later, in the hotel room, she looks at Gatsby out of "frightened eyes." Tom's eyes are flashing, and he claims to have a second sight. Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's faded eyes "keep their vigil," and George, "hollow-eyed," shades his eyes. Myrtle's eyes have peculiar intensity and are wide with jealous terror when she sees the party headed for New York City.

Perhaps the most significant device in this chapter is the final image. Nick walks away from Gatsby, who is anxious that Tom might find out that Daisy had been driving. Nick leaves Gatsby "standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing." The image clearly recalls the one at the end of chapter 1 where Gatsby watches over the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. By juxtaposing the two images, the purpose becomes clear: as a goal, as the tangible American Dream, Daisy is inadequate, unworthy. The dreamer has invested everything to attain her; now, the narrator tells us, looking at her is like "—watching over nothing." As an obsessive pursuit, she is unworthy. By revisiting this image and by calling attention to the difference in the two scenes, just by using the dash to denote a breaking off, a device to slow the reader down and thus emphasize the changed interpretation, Nick as narrator subtly conveys his assessment of the situation and, beyond the actual incident, of the broader American Dream.

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Nick's restlessness precludes sleep. When he hears Gatsby return home in a taxi, he rushes over, feeling he should warn his neighbor to go away for a while, knowing the car will be traced. Aghast, Gatsby explains that he has to stay to protect Daisy, the first "nice" girl he has ever known. He uses Nick's visit as an opportunity to relive the Dan Cody story and his Camp Taylor experience.

Like many other officers, Gatsby had visited Daisy while in Louisville, but always he knew he was in her beautiful house by a "colossal accident." Again, like many others, "Gatsby took Daisy one still October night" because "he had no real right to touch her hand." Ever since that time, she had been his grail. She had disappeared into her rich house, much as she now retreats into the secret society, but he felt he must one day marry her because of what had transpired between them. Gatsby was surprised to find that he loved Daisy.

Abroad, Gatsby did well in the war; but instead of being shipped back home, he was sent to Oxford. Young and restless, Daisy was losing confidence in their relationship, and so she began going out again, "half a dozen dates a day with half a dozen men." When Gatsby did get back home, Daisy and Tom were on their wedding trip. He stayed a week in Louisville, spending the last of his army pay.

Back in the present, morning comes, and the gardener, the last of Gatsby's servants, comes to say he is planning to drain the pool, autumn being in the air. Gatsby suggests he wait since he himself had not used the pool all summer. Ironically, unaware that Daisy and Tom are already packing their bags for an escape abroad, he waits for Daisy's call, not the usual calls from Chicago or Philadelphia or Detroit, while floating on an air mattress in the pool he had not used before. When Nick leaves for work, he shouts, "They're a rotten crowd. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."

At work Jordan telephones Nick, but he fails to establish any future plans for seeing her. He is unable to reach Gatsby by phone because the line continues to be busy, perhaps being held for incoming “business” calls or, more likely, a call from Daisy. Nick plans to take the 3:50 train home.

The narrative then takes us back to the Valley of Ashes where, the night before, Michaelis continued to befriend George. He asks if he and Myrtle had ever had children. George explains he has found a dog leash wrapped in tissue paper on her bureau: they have no dog. As he grieves, he looks out the window at the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. He remembers telling Myrtle, “God knows what you’ve been doing.” Still looking at the billboard, he also recalls warning, “God sees everything.” Seeing George’s eyes fixed on the billboard, Michaelis simplistically reminds him, “That’s an advertisement.” Michaelis leaves at 6:00, relieved by another watcher, but then George leaves, stops for a sandwich, which he does not eat, and a cup of coffee; and for three hours disappears from view. By 2:30 he has found out what he needed to know about the owner of the death car and is asking someone the way to Gatsby’s house. By now, he knows Gatsby’s identity. Thirty minutes before, Gatsby had entered the pool; no telephone message arrived. Surreptitiously, George glides toward Gatsby, fires a gun killing him, and then turns the gun on himself. “And the holocaust was complete.”

Analysis

By this stage of the novel, the literary techniques, noted already, begin to coalesce to clarify and emphasize themes. Auditory and color images, cars and eyes as symbols, recurring tags to characterize—these and other devices reinforce Fitzgerald’s statement concerning the American Dream. Sounds or auditory images appear early. At the beginning of the chapter, Nick hears a “groaning foghorn,” a subtle reminder of the physical manifestation of Gatsby’s dream—the green light across the bay. Another 1920s song surfaces in the flashback to Daisy and Gatsby’s first meeting in Louisville, this time the *Beale Street Blues*, always, it seems, accompanied by the wail of the saxophone. Such is the objective correlative. The ringing of the telephone in Nick’s office, described like “a divot from a green golf-links,” seems to come sailing in the window; it is a call from Jordan. The telephone, too, connects characters with some of the baser elements of society. Gatsby receives frequent phone calls ostensibly from his underworld connections. Tom receives calls from his mistress, even during dinner in his own home. Ultimately, the shots fired to end Gatsby’s life are heard by the chauffeur, “one of Wolfsheim’s protégés.” Combined, the sounds intensify and connect with the wail, the lament of wasted lives.

Colors contrast significantly in this section of the palette. In Daisy’s girlhood home, romances were not laid away in lavender but were gay and radiant. In fact, her world was “redolent of orchids.” Dancing went on all night; a “hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust,” and at the “gray tea hour” there were rooms with fresh faces, coming and going, drifting here and there “like rose petals blown by the sad horns around the floor.” Daisy was fresh with “many clothes,” the golden girl, the king’s daughter, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor,” always remembered driving her white car. Sad and disillusioned, Gatsby leaves Louisville on a yellow trolley. Brought back into the present by the dawn, Nick notices light filling the house with “gray-turning, gold-turning light,” a description with symbolic overtones. Nick compliments Gatsby, who is standing on his doorsteps, waving good-bye in his “gorgeous pink rag of a suit,” a bright spot of color against the white steps. Tenacious in hope, Gatsby maintains his “romantic readiness” to the very end. In retrospect, Nick is glad he paid Gatsby the compliment that he was worth more than the whole “rotten crowd” put together.

In the Valley of Ashes as Michaelis tries to console George and assuage his grief, “hard brown beetles kept thudding against the dull light,” and George shows Michaelis the dog-leash “made of leather and braided silver.” As Wilson turns his eyes to the ashheaps, “small gray clouds took on fantastic shapes and scurried here and there in the faint dawn wind.” The yellow death car and the yellowing trees combine to portend death for the driver of the car and, simultaneously, for the season of the year, aided by the “ashen, fantastic figure gliding” toward Gatsby through the amorphous trees, leaving his mark in “a thin red circle” of blood in the water. The spectrum of colors—at times the connotation clear, at other times dual or ambivalent—subtly

but effectively delineates the difference between a dream in its pure state and the perversion of that dream, “foul dust” floating in the wake of it.

An interesting and significant allusion appears in chapter 8, a reference which helps to clarify Gatsby’s dream quality. Having “taken” Daisy, Gatsby felt an obligation to marry her, a responsibility which subsequently turned to love, much to his surprise. He found that “he had committed himself to the following of a grail.” Like Galahad, the pure, sinless knight in Arthurian legend, Gatsby was pure, untainted by wealth, and wedded to the vision of this damsel on high. He forsakes all to pursue the grail. He pays any price to win this most valuable person. Ironically, Daisy is unworthy as a quest. Although she is described as the only nice girl Gatsby had ever known, Fitzgerald puts the word *nice* in quotation marks. Once again, the punctuation enables the novelist to explain his meaning. Ultimately, Gatsby’s body ends up on the floor of the pool, corresponding in an inverted way to the passing of Galahad from this life, his passing associated with water but in an inverted, upside-down way. Realistically, she could not have risen to the stature expected; perhaps it was unfair of Gatsby to expect it of her.

Again in chapter 8, the craftsman/novelist continues the epithet-like descriptions. Daisy’s voice is “huskier and more charming than ever,” the recurring tag associated with her voice characterizing her as charming and rich, commanding and demanding. Keeping half a dozen dates a day with half a dozen men, she was living in a “twilight universe,” one that would make Nick’s provincial squeamishness, his inherent honesty, most uncomfortable. Gatsby, though, smiles his “radiant and understanding smile,” a part of the tag characterization that recurs. His smile has “a quality of eternal reassurance in it.” It understands you as far as you want to be understood, believes in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assures you that it has precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hope to convey. He typifies the quintessential friend. He waved Nick good-bye as he had signaled many other guests over the past five years. From them he had concealed his “incorruptible dream.”

Toward the end, dust descriptions intensify. Little boys in the Valley of Ashes are looking for “dark spots in the dust,” and Wilson observes “small gray clouds” which take on “fantastic shapes.” He himself becomes one of those shapes as he approaches Gatsby’s house: he is an “ashen, fantastic figure,” gliding through amorphous trees. Conversely, garden images diminish. Gatsby acknowledges how “grotesque” a thing a rose is, and he probably concludes that he has paid “a high price for living too long with a single dream.” Dust and ashes make the statement that America, like this individual product of its conditioning, has paid too high a price to achieve the traditional, undefiled dream.

Naming, another literary technique, provides the same commentary. The title of the book, *The Great Gatsby*, deserves attention. Is Gatsby truly great? Is he the epitome of the American Dream? After all, he is a bootlegger, a man with unsavory underworld connections, a fraud in the sense that he misrepresents his origin. Does *Gatsby* derive from *gat*, the term for *gun* popular in the 1920s? Since Gatsby presents himself as “a son of God” who must be about his father’s business, it is *possible* that the title is meant to suggest “God’s boy,” a phrase which means just that—“he must be about His Father’s business.” This description alludes to Jesus who in New Testament accounts explains an absence to his earthly parents by saying he was in the temple—they should have known where to find him, for he had to be about His Father’s business. Nick’s interpretation of that business in Gatsby’s case is “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty”—such as wealth. Such a Platonic conception is the kind of creation a 17-year-old boy “would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.” Seeing himself as a god or demigod, perhaps bearing a charmed life, he steadfastly continues on his quest for what he perceives to be the highest good. Had Fitzgerald stayed with his original title, *Trimalchio of West Egg*, he would have made a statement in that way as well. If Gatsby is like Trimalchio, a vulgar and obscenely rich protagonist, the purpose is clear. These are pejorative designations. If he as a product of the American Dream is the best America can produce, the novel is indeed a tragedy.

Other names equally important include Daisy, a flower that is associated with daybreak; the word originally meant “day’s eye.” The break of day should be a harbinger of newness, freshness, purity; ironically, Daisy, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor,” cynical and bored, is quite the opposite. Names of settings—East and West *Egg*, associated with birth and new life, and the Valley of Ashes, associated with death and waste and, by extension, “the valley of the shadow of death”—function significantly, too.

Thus, all the literary devices coalesce to reinforce and clarify the dominant theme—that we have wasted our potential, the original American Dream. The symbols, especially the eyes on the billboard and the green light, emphasize the contrast between the original untainted dream under the watchful eyes of a benevolent if omniscient God and the “Money-is-Everything” society where God has either forgotten about His creation or has turned His back upon it. Cars as symbols no less effectively convey the potential being replaced by the sordid. Images of colors and of heat as well as characterization carry the same message concerning the schism between the dream and reality in the American wasteland.

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

New Character

Henry C. Gatz: Gatsby’s father who comes to attend the funeral

Summary

Two years later, Nick remembers vividly the endless questioning by policemen and newspapermen in the wake of Gatsby’s murder. Wilson, thought to be a madman, “a man deranged by grief,” is found guilty, and the case is closed. When Nick calls Daisy, he learns that she and Tom have left with baggage, no destination or return date known. Subsequent calls to Wolfsheim and other “friends” are futile: no one can attend Gatsby’s funeral. Three days later Henry Gatz sends a telegram with instructions to postpone the funeral until he can get there.

Bundled up against the September day, Mr. Gatz arrives and begins to exult in Gatsby’s possessions. He brings with him an old picture, dirty and cracked, of Gatsby’s house, and he shares the information that Gatsby had bought a house for him two years before. He produces a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* in which Jimmy, as he was known as a boy, had written his daily schedule and “general resolves.” Clearly, the boy had from childhood aspired to great plans, whatever they might be.

After waiting a long while, it becomes clear that nobody is coming to the funeral. After all the hundreds of guests that had come to Gatsby’s house, no one cares enough or is too fearful to attend the funeral except Nick, Mr. Gatz, the minister, four or five servants, and the postman from West Egg. As they start into the cemetery, Owl Eyes drives up. His eulogy—“The poor son-of-a-bitch”—succinctly sums up the situation. Of course, Daisy has not sent a message or flowers.

Nick’s final visit with Jordan provides the opportunity for her to retort meaningfully that Nick, like her, had been a “bad driver.” He concludes he is 30 and too old to lie to himself and call it honor. One afternoon late in October he sees Tom Buchanan on Fifth Avenue. When Tom extends his hand, Nick refuses to shake it. Instead, he asks, almost rhetorically, “What did you say to Wilson that afternoon?” Tom acknowledges that he told him who owned the death car and then accuses Nick of having been duped by Gatsby, as Daisy had been earlier. He shares with Nick that he cried like a baby when he saw the box of dog biscuits in the flat he and Myrtle had shared. Nick concludes that “they were careless people,” for they “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.”

Nick packs his trunk, returns for one last look at Gatsby's mansion, and returns to his Midwest. He philosophizes that this has been a story of the West, after all, and those in the East will be glad to be rid of his "provincial squeamishness." Belatedly, he becomes aware of the Dutch sailors who came to the new world in quest of a dream. Brooding on the old world, Nick thinks of Gatsby, wondering when he first picked out the green light. His dream must have seemed so close when, in actuality, it was already behind him. He promises that tomorrow we will run faster to attain that dream. Like boats, "we are borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Analysis

In this last chapter Nick enjoys the vantage point of two years as he looks back on the aftermath of Gatsby's death. Seemingly the closest person to his neighbor, Nick takes charge as best he can. Concurrent with the pathos of his reporting of the event and his taking Gatsby's side is the satiric commentary that a Gatsby is the best America can produce. As he tries to muster a crowd for the funeral, Nick makes indefatigable attempts by phone, by letter, and by a visit to Wolfsheim. Ultimately, the day of the funeral, he visits Wolfsheim's office which is labeled "Swastika Holding Company." Inside, he hears someone whistling "The Rosary," tunelessly. For such a sinister man, an underworld character who wears cuff buttons made of the "finest specimens of human molars," it is ironic that he is whistling a religious tune.

Wolfsheim recalls that when Gatsby came out of the army he "was so hard up he had to keep on wearing his uniform because he couldn't buy some regular clothes." Like George who had to borrow a suit to be married in, Gatsby had to depend on a Wolfsheim to clothe and feed him, a gesture not altogether altruistic, since he saw in Gatsby's winsome smile and in his Oxford experience a front man without peer. Therefore, he "raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter." Nick has to wonder if their partnership had included the World Series transaction in 1919.

Another interesting facet of Gatsby's development is his book of schedules. Mr. Gatz finds it in a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, another name reference to the Old West, coincidentally the repository for Gatsby—or Jimmy's—early dreams. The list, which in some ways suggests Myrtle's list of "things to buy" in New York, includes the Ben Franklin virtues as found in his [Autobiography](#). Gatsby's day began at an early 6:00 for exercise, study, work, sports, elocution, and poise as well as general resolves such as "saving \$3.00 per week" and "being better to parents." These worthwhile albeit pathetic resolutions replicate, in part, the seven cardinal virtues, obviously worthy ideals for self-improvement. Regrettably, his goals to improve his mind, specifically, had been converted to goals concerning opulence and a hedonistic lifestyle when he met Dan Cody.

The eyes of the otherwise anonymous Owl Eyes now seem to suggest wisdom, despite his earlier inebriation. Having known Gatsby's situation, he concludes, "The poor son-of-a-bitch,"—the only, or at least the kindest, eulogy Gatsby would receive. Nick somberly synthesizes the situation and concludes, "This has been a story of the West, after all." Of note is his seeming condemnation of the mess we have made of the Western world discovered by breathless Dutch sailors centuries before. As he gazes at West Egg, especially, Nick sees a night scene by El Greco, a typical distortion of reality, of "a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon."

One last meeting with Jordan, her jauntiness still apparent, her balancing act with raised chin, her hair the color of an autumn leaf, convinces Nick this lifestyle is not for him. Perhaps she is right when she reminds him of his having said a bad driver is safe until she meets another bad driver. Nevertheless, Nick determines he is too far along, being 30, to play games and call it honor.

One last visit transpires with Tom, whom Nick encounters on Fifth Avenue. Tom has no problem admitting his involvement with identifying Gatsby as the driver of the car that killed Myrtle, a statement that verifies he still does not know Daisy was driving. He weeps, not because he caused Gatsby's murder for all practical

purposes or had any involvement in that situation, but because the dog biscuits in the flat made him realize how awful it was to lose his mistress. George had likewise wept because of his love for Myrtle. The two men have one thing in common—as Myrtle was unfaithful to George, Daisy was unfaithful to Tom. Myrtle had called George a coward, but in the end he has enough courage to try to make amends for her death.

Tom, by contrast, cannot or will not accept the consequences of his actions. In the final judgment he is a coward. Nick recognizes the fact that Tom has no remorse, just as he had none at the time of the car wreck with the hotel maid while he and Daisy were virtually on their honeymoon. Tom finds a retreat into the world of money or vast carelessness, or “whatever it was that kept” him and Daisy together and “let other people clean up the mess they had made.” They seem to live in the unending moral adolescence which only affluence can produce and protect. On all levels, morals are corrupt: if Daisy and Catherine and Myrtle can be bought, Fitzgerald must be saying that every man (or woman) has his (or her) price.

So Nick goes back home, taking the remnants of his “provincial squeamishness” out of Tom, Daisy, and Jordan’s lives. One last look at Gatsby’s house shows on the white steps “an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick.” Nick erases it, drawing his shoe “raspingly along the stone.” He remembers the “green breast of the new world” in connection with Gatsby and concludes they were “face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” That was the last “transitory enchanted moment” when man “must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired.” So goes the American Dream. Gatsby’s dream was actually behind him “somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” The national dream, like Gatsby’s in all its idealism, asked too much. Yet his spirit never succumbed. Nick’s conclusion is that “we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,” even as he has relived the past as promised at the beginning of chapter 1. Gatsby belongs to the past, not the future. Worthy of note is the fact that these final words are the epitaph on Fitzgerald’s tombstone.

Still, Gatsby’s green light was both his yesterday and his tomorrow. It symbolized the dream of his boyhood and the hope of fulfillment in the future. It represents the reckless, success at any cost, pursuit of the entire American Dream. Nick describes it as representing “the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us.” It can be associated with the “green breast of the new world” in the most idealistic interpretation. As Daisy blossoms for Gatsby, the new world had flowered for the Dutch settlers. In the style of [T. S. Eliot](#) he declares of the Dream, “It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning....”

Enough satirical devices are operative in the novel to justify calling it a satire. Conventional, universal symbols are inverted: white represents loss of purity; green below the surface suggests decadence or immorality. Silver and gold are immoral because of the price paid to acquire them. Names are ironic: the title, names of characters, names of guests written on the railroad schedule, such as the Leeches, the Catlips, the Dancies, and “Rotgut” Ferret, satirize the society of the 1920s.

Plot details are ironic: no moral differences exist in place or character, Fitzgerald seems to say. Settings are ironic: neither East Egg with its glittering mansions nor West Egg with its *nouveau riche* is worthy of imitation. The Valley of Ashes is certainly not desirable. Archetypal symbols are ironic: instead of spring being a time of new life, Jordan declares new life begins in the fall. Images of eyes suggest not God’s looking over his universe but the *absence* of God. If He exists, his eyes, like Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s, are faded, enervated—He lacks concern. Materialism has replaced idealism, and neither has succeeded in accomplishing the true American Dream.

Nick is able to see what has happened to America from the Dutch sailors to Gatsby’s world, and, though he has just turned 30, he is prepared and eager to return to the Midwest, leaving behind all the sophistication and

superficiality, the “racy adventurous feel of it” that he initially enjoyed. He has no choice but to return to the environment where he learned human decencies and honor; his increasing awareness demands that he reject Jordan and the lifestyle she represents.

In the end, everyone’s dreams are unfulfilled. Neither Nick’s moralism, Gatsby’s idealism, Tom’s materialism, nor George’s emotionalism produces gratification. The harshness of reality makes the American Dream futile; sadly, no one can return to the dreams of youth after maturity imposes that reality. No less clear is the comment that a nation has the same limitation.

As Daisy said at her daughter’s birth, the best thing a girl can be is a beautiful fool. The shrines of the American Dream are beauty and appearance, self-adulation, money, and pleasure. These things are palpable; idealism is not. As satire, *The Great Gatsby* negates the American Dream.

The Great Gatsby: Quizzes

Chapter 1 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Who is the narrator of the story?
2. What is the significance of the white space between paragraphs 4 and 5?
3. From what part of the country does Nick originally come?
4. Why has Nick moved to New York?
5. How does Nick come to live next door to Jay Gatsby?
6. Where had Nick known Tom Buchanan before?
7. What is Jordan Baker’s relationship to Daisy Buchanan?
8. What does Nick learn from Jordan when Tom is called to the phone?
9. What is the “secret society”?
10. What does Nick see Gatsby doing at the end of the chapter?

Answers

1. Nick Carraway tells the story as he learns it from various sources.
2. The white space indicates where the flashback to Nick’s experience in New York begins.
3. The Midwest is the home of Nick and his ancestors, a part of the country in touch with the soil and wholesome American values.
4. After the war, he is looking for a better job than the Midwest provides.
5. He rents a bungalow with a friend who subsequently transfers to Washington, leaving Nick without a roommate.

6. They had been in school together at Yale.
7. The two had been friends in Louisville, Kentucky. Daisy is two years older than Jordan.
8. Tom has “a woman” in New York. Jordan enjoys eavesdropping.
9. The “secret society” consists of distinguished people who, seemingly, are above the law; their social standing is power.
10. Gatsby is stretching out his arms toward a green light at the end of a dock across the water in a worshipful stance.

Chapter 2 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What is the Valley of Ashes literally?
2. Who or what is Dr. T. J. Eckleburg?
3. What is George Wilson’s occupation?
4. What items does Myrtle purchase in the city?
5. What is significant about Myrtle’s questioning whether the dog is a boy or girl?
6. Who is Catherine?
7. What effect does the change of dress have on Myrtle?
8. How does Myrtle talk about the help at the hotel?
9. What rumor has Catherine heard about Gatsby?
10. How does Catherine explain to Nick the affair of Myrtle and Tom?

Answers

1. It is an area, something like an isthmus, joining West Egg and East Egg. It parallels a railroad track.
2. The picture of Dr. Eckleburg, an oculist in a bygone age, appears on a billboard in the Valley of Ashes.
3. Wilson pumps gas and repairs cars.
4. She purchases *Town Tattle* magazine, cold cream, perfume, and a puppy. She has another list to buy the next day: “a massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer.”
5. She cannot acknowledge the sex of the dog—it is too delicate an issue—but she herself is involved in an illicit sexual relationship.

6. Catherine is Myrtle's sister procured as a companion for Nick. She may be a prostitute since she "lived with a girl friend at a hotel."
7. She is transformed as vitality changes to "impressive hauteur."
8. She refers to them as an inferior order; she has changed roles as she has changed clothes.
9. He is a nephew or cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's.
10. According to Catherine, Daisy is Catholic and refuses to give Tom a divorce.

Chapter 3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What kinds of cars does Gatsby use to transport guests?
2. How do the guests behave?
3. What does Nick wear to the party?
4. How does Gatsby interact with the guests?
5. What observation does Owl Eyes make about Gatsby's library?
6. What is Nick's first opinion of Gatsby?
7. What happens at the end of the party as the guests are leaving?
8. What does Gatsby's formal gesture of waving farewell remind us of?
9. What story does Nick recall about Jordan, and what is the catalyst for his remembering?
10. How does Nick provide a contrast, a foil character, to Jordan?

Answers

1. His station wagon and a Rolls-Royce provide transportation for the guests.
2. The guests display the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks.
3. He dresses up in his white flannels.
4. He does not participate.
5. The library contains real books though the pages have yet to be cut. Here, and in references to Tom's "reading," the emphasis seems to be on pseudo-intellectualism.
6. He is impressed with his smile and his genuine interest.
7. A wheel comes off a drunken guest's car, and the occupants end up in a ditch.

8. Earlier he extended his arm over the bay toward the green light.
9. She “had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round” of a golf tournament. Nick remembers this scandal as he and Jordan are “on a house-party together up in Warwick,” and she leaves a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it.
10. Jordan is “incurably dishonest”; Nick is exceedingly honest.

Chapter 4 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What is the date at this point in the novel?
2. Whom does Nick encounter at Gatsby’s party?
3. What is the suggestion about Henry L. Palmetto’s death?
4. In the description of Gatsby’s car, what is the significance of its being bright with nickel and swollen in its monstrous length with all kinds of boxes?
5. What phrase does Gatsby repeatedly use to address Nick and others?
6. In what country did Gatsby receive a medal “For Valour Extraordinary”?
7. Who fixed the World Series in 1919, according to Gatsby?
8. Why is Daisy’s reputation so pristine?
9. For how long has Gatsby been pursuing Daisy?
10. What phrase keeps coming back to Nick?

Answers

1. It is now July 5 1922 and shortly thereafter.
2. Somewhat surprisingly, he runs into Jordan Baker.
3. It was a suicide prompted by some dark dealing or situation.
4. It is like a god’s chariot.
5. He often calls others “Old Sport,” a phrase he perhaps picked up while studying briefly at Oxford.
6. In tiny Montenegro he was recognized for valor.
7. According to Gatsby, the Series was fixed by one man—Wolfsheim, a fictional character based on a real person.
8. Daisy does not drink.

9. Gatsby has been reading papers, keeping clippings, looking tirelessly for Daisy for five years.
10. Nick remembers the saying, “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.”

Chapter 5 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Nick say Gatsby’s house looks like the World’s Fair?
2. How does Gatsby’s gardener help prepare for Daisy’s visit?
3. How does Gatsby dress for the rendezvous with Daisy?
4. Who is the Finn referred to in chapter 5?
5. How long has it been since Daisy and Gatsby had seen each other?
6. What does Gatsby’s maid do when leaning out a central bay window?
7. In what way are the various rooms in Gatsby’s mansion described in historical terms?
8. Who was Gatsby’s first benefactor?
9. What part does nature play in the rendezvous?
10. Who provides the musical background for the love scene?

Answers

1. It is so lit up late at night.
2. He cuts Nick’s grass as well as Gatsby’s.
3. He wears a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie, accouterments fit for a god.
4. She is Nick’s domestic help.
5. Gatsby has counted every minute for these five years they have been apart.
6. She spits, an incongruous action in such a setting.
7. The description includes Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons, a sort of continental decor.
8. Dan Cody, who had made money from silver and gold fields, took him aboard his yacht.
9. It rains.
10. When Daisy and Gatsby are reunited, Klipspringer plays the piano.

Chapter 6 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. In what state did Gatsby grow up?
2. What was his real name?
3. What was Dan Cody's background?
4. Who was Ella Kaye?
5. How much was to have been Gatsby's inheritance from Cody?
6. Why did he not receive it?
7. What is the significance of the threesome not waiting for Gatsby?
8. Why was Daisy appalled at Gatsby's party?
9. How did Tom charge Gatsby with making his money?
10. In what season of the year had Gatsby met and kissed Daisy?

Answers

1. Gatsby was reared in North Dakota.
2. He was named James or Jimmy Gatz.
3. Apparently, he had made a fortune in metals from Nevada silver fields and gold in the Yukon.
4. Ella Kaye was Cody's mistress.
5. He was to receive \$25,000.
6. Ella Kaye found a legal strategy to cut him out and inherit Cody's millions herself.
7. He does not understand that their invitation is superficial; in fact, he is being insulted without being aware of it.
8. The sophistication and restraint of the "secret society are missing." The vitality and simplicity of Gatsby's guests are virtually palpable, and Daisy is unappreciative.
9. Tom denounces Gatsby as a bootlegger.
10. He had known her in Louisville in the autumn of the year.

Chapter 7 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Gatsby let all his domestic help go?

2. Whom does he use instead?
3. Why do the characters decide to go to New York?
4. What does Pammy wear when she comes into the room?
5. What does Gatsby say about Daisy's voice?
6. What does Tom drive to New York?
7. Who rides with Gatsby?
8. What comment does Tom make about drug stores?
9. Of what does Tom accuse Gatsby?
10. How old is Nick at the party?

Answers

1. He dismisses them to accommodate meetings with Daisy and her wish for privacy.
2. He uses connections of Wolfsheim's, people who owed him favors.
3. They want to escape the heat and boredom.
4. Like her mother, she wears white.
5. Her voice is "full of money."
6. He drives Gatsby's yellow car.
7. Only Daisy rides with Gatsby.
8. You can buy gasoline or most anything else at such stores—even liquor, he implies.
9. He accuses him of bootlegging, gambling, swindling, and even something bigger and more damaging than these.
10. Nick turns 30 years old on this day.

Chapter 8 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. How late does Gatsby stand outside Daisy's house, waiting to see if she needed him?
2. Why is Gatsby's house unkempt?
3. Why does Nick advise Gatsby to go away a while?
4. Where had Gatsby met Daisy, according to the story he tells Nick?

5. What might Fitzgerald mean in describing Daisy's porch as "bright with the bought luxury of starshine"?
6. Why didn't Gatsby return to Daisy immediately after the war?
7. When Gatsby returned to Louisville, where was Daisy?
8. Why is the chauffeur about to drain the pool?
9. Why does Gatsby ask him to wait?
10. After learning who owns the yellow death car, what does Wilson do?

Answers

1. He waits until 4:00 a.m.
2. He has released all of his servants.
3. Nick is confident the car will be traced to Gatsby, putting Gatsby's life in jeopardy.
4. He met her while he was at Camp Taylor from which he and other officers went to visit Daisy.
5. The brightness in her description results from somebody's materialism.
6. He was sent to study at Oxford.
7. She was on her wedding trip with Tom.
8. With autumn approaching, leaves will fall and clog up the pipes.
9. He plans to take his first swim of the season in it.
10. Wilson kills Gatsby and then turns the gun on himself.

Chapter 9 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. How is Gatsby's death explained by the press in local newspapers?
2. How does Catherine respond to questions about her sister?
3. How does Wolfsheim's letter attempt to explain his not attending the funeral?
4. Who is Henry C. Gatz?
5. Why does Klipspringer call?
6. When Nick locates Wolfsheim's office and demands to see him, what is ironic about the situation?
7. How does Wolfsheim remember Gatsby?

8. Why did Gatsby continue to wear Army uniforms?
9. What could Nick mean when he concludes, “This has been a story of the West, after all—”?
10. What is the meaning of the last paragraph, the metaphor, of the book?

Answers

1. Wilson is a “madman,” reduced to a “man deranged by grief.”
2. She declares she has never known Gatsby, that she was “completely happy with her husband,” and that she has never been involved in any kind of mischief.
3. He is tied up in important business and cannot “get mixed up in this thing now.”
4. He is Gatsby’s father from Minnesota.
5. He calls about some shoes he left at Gatsby’s, not out of concern.
6. Wolfsheim is sinister and apparently ruthless, but he is whistling “The Rosary.”
7. He was a major, just coming out of the army, covered with medals.
8. He was so poor he could not afford regular clothes.
9. It is the story of the Western continent as well as the Midwest contrasted with the East.
10. We persist in our drive forward, but, like boats moving against the current, we are always borne back into the past. As the National Archives has it, “The past is prologue to the future.”

The Great Gatsby: Ten Important Quotations

• Quote #1

ch. 1, p. 2 (based on Scribner paperback edition 2004; your page # may not correspond)
[Narrator describes Jay Gatsby.]

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.... [Gatsby had] an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

In the introduction to the story, narrator Nick Carraway describes Gatsby as he, retrospectively, perceives him. Immediately, Fitzgerald establishes Gatsby as an exceptionally romantic hero and a hopeful dreamer. The narrator tips his hand and reveals his favoritism for Gatsby. This quote is important because it not only establishes the essence of the Gatsby character but it also foreshadows the very nature of the story and its primary themes: idealism, aspiration, and loss.

• Quote #2

ch. 2, pp. 23-24
[Establishes the domain of the working poor.]

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.... [And the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg] brood on over the solemn dumping ground.

In this dramatic description, Fitzgerald sets the scene for the world of the working poor, where George and Myrtle Wilson live. The “valley of ashes” provides a sharp, poetic contrast to the cool, lush estates of East Egg. What would normally be signs of life—wheat fields and gardens—are merely forms in a smoldering, colorless landscape. Importantly, this scene immediately follows a genteel luncheon at the Buchanan mansion. Sea breezes are replaced by “rising smoke,” extensive green lawns by “grotesque gardens.”

This scene also establishes the class conflict that permeates the book, and is a foreboding allusion to the death that occurs here. We become aware for the first time of the symbolic eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, who watches over this “solemn dumping ground” as a God-like witness to the despair and hopelessness that emanates from the place.

- **Quote #3**

ch. 3, p. 50

[In the midst of his own party, Gatsby is alone.]

When the *Jazz History of the World* was over, girls were putting their heads on men’s shoulders ... swooning backward playfully into men’s arms ... but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link.

This passage serves to capture a sense of Gatsby’s parties, as well as his place in them. Fitzgerald references a “sensational” piece of music of the day, describes the playful, affectionate nature of the guests, and casually notes the hairstyle that practically defined the “flapper.” In the middle of this scene, a scene that Gatsby himself created (he even requested the song), he stands alone, alienated from his own guests. We are reminded that this whole performance is just that—a show put on for everyone but himself.

- **Quote #4**

ch. 5, p. 92

[Gatsby impresses Daisy with his shirt collection.]

[He] began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel.... While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly ... [Daisy] began to cry stormily.

“They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed.... “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”

This quote, which comes at the climax of Gatsby’s tour of his mansion, highlights Daisy’s shallow, materialistic nature and Gatsby’s pathetic, transparent efforts to impress her. Gatsby has acquired the trappings of wealth and privilege to the point of absurdity. It’s clear that the shirts, like all of Gatsby’s possessions, exist for the sole purpose of convincing Daisy of his worth. Importantly, Daisy is not moved by the fact that Gatsby has dedicated his life since they parted to winning her back, that he has kept a constant vigil for their lost love. No, Daisy is crying because the shirts are beautiful.

- **Quote #5**

ch. 6, p. 110

[Exchange between Nick and Gatsby.]

“You can’t repeat the past.”

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

There is no end to Gatsby’s romantic idealism. He never matures, or moves beyond his seventeen-year-old conception of the world. He does not permit incidental facts, like the passage of time, to dampen his dreams. He honestly believe that he can return to the past and to his short-lived affair with Daisy.

- **Quote #6**

ch. 7, p. 120

[Gatsby describes Daisy’s voice.]

“Her voice is full of money,” [Gatsby] said suddenly.

That was it.... That was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal’s song of it....

Much is made throughout the book of Daisy’s voice, the musical quality of it, its allure, and its seductive power. At one point it is described as a “deathless song.” In this quote, Gatsby finally and simply captures the essence of it: money. Fitzgerald has succeeded in fully internalizing Daisy’s exalted position not only through her appearance and manners but also in the very sound of her voice. This also reinforces the strong musical theme that runs through the book.

- **Quote #7**

ch. 8, p. 150

[Gatsby idealizes wealth.]

Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.

This quote is important for two reasons. First it demonstrates the idealization that Gatsby maintains of the rich. It’s a fantastic, fantasy view of money—pure imagination. And this concept of wealth, that Gatsby formed at an early age, has stayed with him throughout his life, unspoiled by life’s realities, including even war.

Second, this quote foreshadows what’s to come. Gatsby imagines Daisy, because of her position, to be above the struggles of the poor. In fact, she becomes a central player in these struggles when she accidentally kills Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson, as Myrtle tries to escape her husband and her miserable life.

- **Quote #8**

ch. 8, p. 159

[Wilson recognizes the eyes of “God”.]

Wilson: “God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!”

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

“God sees everything,” repeated Wilson.

“That’s an advertisement,” Michaelis assured him.

This exchange between the distraught Wilson and Michaelis, a local restaurant owner, is important because it finally brings to light the full impact of the billboard, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. At various points throughout the story, we are reminded that the watchful eyes of Dr. Eckleburg keep vigil over the sad happenings of the valley of ashes. Now the eyes are most explicitly equated with the eyes of God, the omniscient witness to the tragic incident that forms the novel’s climax.

• **Quote #9**

ch. 9, p. 180

[America is a vast land of possibility.]

Gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world.... For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Possibly, one of the most quoted passages in the book, Fitzgerald likens the hopes and dreams of the first European settlers to those of Gatsby. The virgin continent, with all of its untouched potential, is symbolic of the vast opportunity that continues to fuel the American dream. The “capacity for wonder” reminds us of Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope.” We realize that Gatsby is not unique in his romantic idealism. We understand that so many of us are lured by the promise of something great, something equal to our ability to dream. And in many ways this quality is uniquely American.

• **Quote #10**

ch. 9, p. 180

[Gatsby believes in the future.]

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.... Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

At the close of the book, Nick tries to describe the nature of Gatsby’s hope and draws the parallel to all of our hopes.

The Great Gatsby: Essential Passages

Essential Passage by Character: Nick Carraway

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope.

[*The Great Gatsby*](#), pp. 1-2 (Scribner: New York, 2004)

Summary

Nick Carraway introduces himself as an open and honest individual. Through the guidance and influence of his father, Nick has learned to be tolerant of others because, as his father tells him, "...all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." Because Nick and his father can communicate openly (unlike other characters in the novel), Nick's life has as its foundation a worldview based on compassion.

Nick admits that this level of tolerance has made him vulnerable to all sorts of people and their problems. While he is tolerant of all people, he does not necessarily find all people entertaining or even interesting on the same level. He feels that, in some way, his transparency has made him a homing beacon of the "abnormal mind," opening him up to a wide range of individuals. This spectrum of acquaintances earned him the reputation of being a "politician" in college, a "politician" in a rather negative sense. He is privy to a variety of secret affairs, necessitating a certain level of diplomacy as well as power.

Nick confesses that his status as a confidant was unsought (and basically unwanted). He tried many times to avoid the situation, usually through deceptive means, pretending to be unavailable in some way or another. Yet he is always found and confided in.

Nick, because of his conventional upbringing, finds many of the "intimate revelations" rather too intimate. Moreover, these revelations are neither original nor genuine, but rather "plagiarized" as the youths seek out their individuality by engaging in the same activities everyone else does.

Yet Nick reserves judgment. Why? Because Nick is something of an optimist, and "reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope."

Analysis

In the novel, Nick Carraway functions not just as the first-person narrator: his role is also along the lines of a Greek chorus. He is "on the stage," so to speak, yet in many ways he is outside of the main action of the story. He receives the attentions of Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, yet they receive very little from him. Thus he can stand removed from the conflicts and provide commentary, serving almost as a backdrop against which the action is played. By being a first-person narrator in this way, he avoids the limitations usually imposed by such a viewpoint. He knows the actions, the conversations, and, to a certain extent, the thoughts of the major players, gaining the ability to reflect on them as a whole.

This ability, as the passage above shows, is due to his father's statement. Nick stands on the moral high ground throughout the novel. In a certain way, one might even say that he, rather than the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, functions as the eyes of God. Having established an intimate relationship with each of the major characters, he has an insight into their behavior and their choices. He is not on anyone's "side," until the

very end at Gatsby's death. The only other acquaintance of Gatsby's at the funeral is the "Owl-eyed Man," who himself functions in a limited way as an observer from above (thus his resemblance to the billboard of T. J. Eckleburg).

Nick states that it is his inclination to "reserve all judgments." This practice does give him the moral high ground that enables his function as a chorus, and it also gives Nick an aura of honesty. As he states later in the novel, he is the only completely honest person he knows. Said without pride or deception, Nick is accurate in this perception of himself, and it is important if he is to function as a reliable narrator, which he does. He sees Gatsby, Daisy, Jordan, and Tom as they are, with all their flaws. For example, in a seeming contradiction, Nick states that Gatsby represents all he disapproves of, but he comes out all right in the end. Nick preserves a balanced view of each character. Rarely will he display any indications that he dislikes anyone, though he does occasionally hint at his disapproval of their actions and choices, simply because he is the moral standard of the novel.

One statement stands out as the foundation of truth on which Nick has built his personal philosophy: "Reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope." The profound wisdom of this statement expresses the motivation for Nick's continued interaction with Gatsby to the very end. By being, as ever, the listening ear to all the gossip at Gatsby's parties, Nick is well aware of the questionable nature of Gatsby's past, especially in the procurement of his wealth. Not just unethical but downright illegal though some of these suggestion would be if true, Nick withholds judgment. He has, and continues to have even after Gatsby's death, infinite hope—hope that the innate decency of Jay Gatsby, despite his wrong choices, still exists and, if given time, would have overtaken his obsessions. It is his infinite hope that this goodness will be seen by those who took advantage of Gatsby by attending his parties, drinking his champagne, eating his food. Perhaps all these people are not as selfish as they appear to be. Perhaps, after all, some of them will come to Gatsby's funeral to honor him. Yet no one does, except the Owl-eyed Man, the man who had been impressed by the genuineness of Gatsby's library.

Thus Nick's introduction establishes him firmly as the standard by which all other characters will be measured. He represents the old morality, the one on which the American Dream had been founded, but which, with the onset of the 1920s, quickly faded away. That morality is, in his father's eyes, the prime "advantage" that others have not been given. By his constant moral stance, Nick provides a counterpoint to the other characters who slip into various moral morasses by the novel's end.

Essential Passage by Theme: Deception and Delusion

Wilson's glazed eyes turned out to the ashheaps, where small gray clouds took on fantastic shape and scurried here and there in the faint dawn wind.

"I spoke to her," he muttered, after a long silence. "I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God. I took her to the window."—with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it—"and I said 'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!'"

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

"God sees everything," repeated Wilson.

[The Great Gatsby](#), pp. 159-160 (Scribner: New York, 2004)

Summary

It is the morning after Myrtle Wilson has died, struck down by the automobile driven by Daisy Buchanan. To George Wilson, despite her unfaithfulness, she was all he had, and her loss is more than he can bear. His plan, once he suspected her infidelity, was to move from the area. Myrtle, unwilling to leave, was locked in her room by her husband until such time as he could acquire money enough to leave. Managing to escape her room, Myrtle ran out into the road, hoping to stop Gatsby, whose car she recognized. She was killed instantly and brought into Wilson's shop. It is only recently that her body has at last been taken away, leaving blood stains on the bench as well as in the road for curious bystanders to gawk at.

George, as the new day dawns, manages to move past his grief to find his revenge. Not suspecting Tom Buchanan as Myrtle's lover, he thinks only of the man in the yellow car. George intends to find out who he is and bring justice.

George looks out at the Valley of Ashes that is his home. The ashes are billowing up in the light wind, bespeaking change and action.

Michaelis, another dweller in the Valley of Ashes, has stayed throughout the night, since George evidently has no friend to stand vigil with him. Michaelis, unaware of George's intentions or justifications, tries to convince him it was only an accident. Yet George insists it was murder. More than that, it was retribution brought on Myrtle for her unfaithfulness.

Looking out of the window, George sees once again the billboard with the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the occultist whose bespectacled visage haunts the Valley of Ashes. This billboard has appeared many times throughout the novel, each character passing it as he or she goes from Long Island to New York. Those eyes seem to be inescapable to no one. To George, they are the eyes of God.

George tells Michaelis in a haunted voice how he had tried to warn Myrtle of the all-seeing nature of God: "I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God." He remembers taking her to the window and pointing out the eyes to her. "God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!"

Michael, confused, looks out the window and sees the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg. George repeats, "God sees everything."

Analysis

A strong thread of deception runs throughout the lives of Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Myrtle. No one is what he or she appears to be. Each is hiding some element of a past or a present in order to maintain a current relationship or status.

The eyes of T. J. Eckleburg have repeatedly appeared in the plot of the novel, each time that a character travels from Long Island to New York. Eckleburg's eyes symbolize the eyes of God, watching over everyone and seeing all that is hidden. As George says, "God sees everything."

This symbolic representation of the concept of "what is done in secret will be shouted from the housetops" infiltrates the machinations of each character. Gatsby's past pokes its head up occasionally, but most often his dishonesty is revealed by his inconsistency in facts relating to his past. He cannot keep his details straight, and thus Nick, the narrator, begins to wonder what the truth is. It is only later, after Gatsby's death, that the truth is revealed.

Daisy's past relationship with Gatsby has been hidden as well. This also is revealed as Gatsby reconnects with his past love. As the course of the story progresses, they sneak around, meeting in secret at Gatsby's

home, where he has dismissed all his previous servants to avoid gossip, surrounding himself with trusted, though equally dishonest, compatriots.

Tom as well has lived a life of deception through his affair with Myrtle. While he is ostensibly open with Nick concerning this, it still relegates him to the group of the dishonest. Myrtle as well hides her relationship from George, but the vast amount of her friends, who live away from the Valley of Ashes, are also aware of it.

Thus, as symbolized by the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg, what is hidden is known. God (and a few chosen individuals) sees everything.

Yet what is effectively hidden is not only the dishonesty but the self-delusion that many of the characters have. Gatsby above all has deluded himself into thinking that he is more than he is and that his humble beginnings were less than they were. He has convinced himself that he was born to the wrong family and thus must re-create himself. Yet in doing so, he betrays all that he truly could be. By deluding himself, he has thus deluded others. In Daisy his rewritten past plays a significant role. As Daisy has rejected him because of his lack of money and status, Gatsby believes that he can earn her love by attaining them, at whatever cost and by any means necessary. Through dishonesty and illegality, Gatsby has become what he had hoped to be and what he thought Daisy wanted him to be. Yet in the end, the truth (whatever it is in Daisy's mind) is not enough to bring him the "grail" that he has been seeking for all those years.

George Wilson, in at last calling the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg the eyes of God, brings to the story the sense that there is a higher standard by which the characters are to be judged. It is a rejection of the delusion that money and power are justifications for any action. Written at a time of transition between the "old morality" of pre-World War I America to that of the "Roaring Twenties," *The Great Gatsby* holds to account those individuals who believe that whatever one chooses to do is right. As George and Nick, the two who still hold to the old morality, can testify, divine or poetic justice will triumph, often in the most tragic ways.

The Great Gatsby: Themes

Culture Clash

By juxtaposing characters from the West and East in America in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was making some moral observations about the people who live there. Those in the Midwest—the newly arrived Nick Carraway—were fair, relatively innocent, unsophisticated, while those who lived in the East for some time—Tom and Daisy Buchanan—were unfair, corrupt, and materialistic. The Westerners who moved East, furthermore, brought the violence of the Old West days to their new lives. Fitzgerald romanticizes the Midwest, since it is where the idealistic Jay Gatz was born and to where the morally enlightened Nick returns. It serves metaphorically as a condition of the heart, of going home to a moral existence rooted in basic, conservative values. Further, the houses of East Egg and West Egg represent similar moral differences. The East is where Daisy and Tom live, and the West is where Gatsby and Nick live. Fitzgerald refers to the West as the green breast of a new world, a reflection of a man's dream, an America subsumed in this image. The materialism of the East creates the tragedy of destruction, dishonesty, and fear. No values exist in such an environment.

American Dream

Gatsby represents the American dream of self-made wealth and happiness, the spirit of youth and resourcefulness, and the ability to make something of one's self despite one's origins. He achieved more than his parents had and felt he was pursuing a perfect dream, Daisy, who for him embodied the elements of success. Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody, was the ultimate self-made man who influenced Gatsby in his tender, impressionable youth. When Gatsby found he could not win Daisy's love, he pursued the American Dream in the guise of Cody. Inherent in this dream, however, was the possibility of giving in to temptation and to

corrupt get-rich-quick schemes like bootlegging and gambling. Fitzgerald's book mirrors the headiness, ambition, despair, and disillusionment of America in the 1920s: its ideals lost behind the trappings of class and material success.

Examples of the American Dream gone awry are plentiful in *The Great Gatsby*: Meyer Wolfsheim's enterprising ways to make money are criminal; Jordan Baker's attempts at sporting fame lead her to cheating; and the Buchanans' thirst for the good life victimizes others to the point of murder. Only Gatsby, who was relatively unselfish in his life, and whose primary flaw was a naive idealism, could be construed as fulfilling the author's vision of the American Dream. Throughout the novel are many references to his tendency to dream, but in fact, his world rests insecurely on a fairy's wing. On the flip side of the American Dream, then, is a naivete and a susceptibility to evil and poor-intentioned people.

Appearances and Reality

Since there is no real love between Gatsby and Daisy, in *The Great Gatsby*, there is no real truth to Gatsby's vision. Hand in hand with this idea is the appearances and reality theme. Fitzgerald displays what critics have termed an ability to see the face behind the mask. Thus, behind the expensive parties, Gatsby is a lonely man. Though hundreds had come to his mansion, hardly anyone came to his funeral. Owl Eyes, Mr. Klipspringer, and the long list of partygoers simply use Gatsby for their pleasures. Gatsby himself is a put-on, with his "Oggsford" accent, fine clothes, and "old boy" routine; behind this facade is a man who is involved in racketeering. Gatsby's greatness lies in his capacity for illusion. Had he seen Daisy for what she was, he could not have loved her with such singleminded devotion. He tries to recapture Daisy, and for a time it looks as though he will succeed. But he must fail because of his inability to separate the ideal from the real. The famous verbal exchange between Nick and Gatsby typifies this: Concerning his behavior with Daisy, Nick tells him he can't repeat the past. "Can't repeat the past," Gatsby replies, "Why of course you can!"

Moral Corruption

The wealthy class is morally corrupt in *The Great Gatsby*, and the objective correlative (a term coined by poet and critic [T. S. Eliot](#) that refers to an object that takes on greater significance and comes to symbolize the mood and world of a literary work) in this case is the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, which preside over the valley of ashheaps near Wilson's garage. There are no spiritual values in a place where money reigns: the traditional ideas of God and Religion are dead here, and the American dream is direly corrupted. This is no place for Nick, who is honest. He is the kind of person who says he is one of the few honest people he's ever met, and one who is let down by the world of excess and indulgence. His mark of sanity is to leave the wasteland environment to return home in the West. In a similar manner, T. S. Eliot's renowned poem [The Waste Land](#) describes the decline of Western civilization and its lack of spirituality through the objective correlative (defining image) of the wasteland.

The Great Gatsby: Style

Point of View

The Great Gatsby is told from the point of view of Nick Carraway, one of the main characters. The technique is similar to that used by British novelist [Joseph Conrad](#) one of Fitzgerald's literary influences, and shows how Nick feels about the characters. Superbly chosen by the author, Nick is a romantic, moralist, and judge who gives the reader retrospective flashbacks that fill us in on the life of Gatsby and then flash forward to foreshadow his tragedy. Nick must be the kind of person whom others trust. Nick undergoes a transformation himself because of his observations about experiences surrounding the mysterious figure of Jay Gatsby. Through this first-person ("I") narrative technique, we also gain insight into the author's perspective. Nick is voicing much of Fitzgerald's own sentiments about life. One is quite simply that "you can never judge a book by its cover" and often times a person's worth is difficult to find at first. Out of the various impressions we have of these characters, we can agree with Nick's final estimation that Gatsby is worth the whole "rotten

bunch of them put together.”

Setting

As in all of Fitzgerald's stories, the setting is a crucial part of *The Great Gatsby*. West and East are two opposing poles of values: one is pure and idealistic, and the other is corrupt and materialistic. The Western states, including the Midwest, represent decency and the basic ethical principles of honesty, while the East is full of deceit. The difference between East and West Egg is a similar contrast in cultures. The way the characters line up morally correlates with their geographical choice of lifestyle. The Buchanans began life in the West but gravitated to the East and stayed there. Gatsby did as well, though only to follow Daisy and to watch her house across the bay. His utter simplicity and naivete indicates an idealism that has not been lost. Nick remains the moral center of the book and returns home to the Midwest. To him, the land is “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that.” He finds that he is unadaptable to life in the East. The memory of the East haunts him once he returns home. Another setting of importance is the wasteland of ash heaps, between New York City and Long Island, where the mechanization of modern life destroys all the past values. Nick's view of the modern world is that God is dead, and man makes a valley of ashes; he corrupts ecology, corrupts the American Dream and desecrates it. The only Godlike image in this deathlike existence are the eyes of Dr. J. L. Eckleburg on a billboard advertising glasses.

Satire

Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a satire, a criticism of society's foibles through humor. The elements of satire in the book include the depiction of the *nouveau riche* (“newly rich”), the sense of vulgarity of the people, the parties intended to draw Daisy over, the grotesque quality of the name “Great” Gatsby in the title. Satire originated in the Roman times, and similarly criticized the rich thugs with no values, tapped into cultural pessimism, and gave readers a glimpse into chaos. *The Great Gatsby* is the tale of the irresponsible rich. Originally, the title of the book was “Trimalchio,” based on an ancient satire of a man called Trimalchio who dresses up to be rich.

Light/Dark Imagery

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author uses light imagery to point out idealism and illusion. The green light that shines off Daisy's dock is one example. Gatsby sees it as his dream, away from his humble beginnings, towards a successful future with the girl of his desire. Daisy and Jordan are in an aura of whiteness like angels—which they are not, of course, yet everything in Gatsby's vision that is associated with Daisy is bright. Her chatter with Jordan is described as “cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes” by Nick. The lamp light in the house is “bright on [Tom's] boots and dull on the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair.” Gatsby comments to Daisy and Nick how the light catches the front of his house and makes it look splendid, and Nick notes how Daisy's brass buttons on her dress “gleamed in the sunlight.” Between the frequent mention of moonlight, twilight, and the women's white gowns, Fitzgerald alludes to the dreamlike qualities of Gatsby's world, and indirectly, to Nick's romantic vision. On the other hand, Meyer Wolfsheim, the gambler, is seen in a restaurant hidden in a dark cellar when Gatsby first introduces him to Nick. “Blinking away the brightness of the street, my eyes picked him out obscurely in the anteroom,” says Nick.

The Great Gatsby: Historical Context

The Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties

The Jazz Age began soon after [World War I](#) and ended with the 1929 stock market crash. Victorious, America experienced an economic boom and expansion. Politically, the country made major advances in the area of women's independence. During the war, women had enjoyed economic independence by taking over jobs for the men who fought overseas. After the war, they pursued financial independence and a freer lifestyle. This

was the time of the “flappers,” young women who dressed up in jewelry and feather boas, wore bobbed hairdos, and danced the Charleston. Zelda Fitzgerald and her cronies, including Sara Murphy, exemplified the ultimate flapper look. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan Baker is an athletic, independent woman, who maintains a hardened, amoral view of life. Her character represents the new breed of woman in America with a sense of power during this time.

A speakeasy, where people could illegally purchase alcohol during Prohibition in the 1920s.

As a reaction against the fads and liberalism that emerged in the big cities after the war, the U.S. Government and conservative elements in the country advocated and imposed legislation restricting the manufacture and distribution of liquor. Its organizers, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, National Prohibition Party, and others, viewed alcohol as a dangerous drug that disrupted lives and families. They felt it the duty of the government to relieve the temptation of alcohol by banning it altogether. In January, 1919, the U.S. Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution that outlawed the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” on a national level. Nine months later, the Volstead Act passed, proving the enforcement means for such measures. Prohibition, however, had little effect on the hedonism of the liquor-loving public, and speakeasies, a type of illegal bar, cropped up everywhere. One Fitzgerald critic, Andre Le Vot, wrote: “The bootlegger entered American folklore with as much public complicity as the outlaws of the Old West had enjoyed.”

New York City and the Urban Corruption

Prohibition fostered a large underworld industry in many big cities, including Chicago and New York. For years, New York was under the control of the Irish politicians of Tammany Hall, which assured that corruption persisted. Bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling thrived, while police took money from shady operators engaged in these activities and overlooked the illegalities. A key player in the era of Tammany Hall was Arnold Rothstein (Meyer Wolfsheim in the novel). Through his campaign contributions to the politicians, he was entitled to a monopoly of prostitution and gambling in New York until he was murdered in 1928.

A close friend of Rothstein, Herman “Rosy” Rosenthal, is alluded to in Fitzgerald's book when Gatsby and Nick meet for lunch. Wolfsheim says that “The old Metropole.... I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there.” This mobster also made campaign contributions, or paid off, his political boss. When the head of police, Charles Becker, tried to receive some of Rosenthal's payouts, Rosenthal complained to a reporter. This act exposed the entire corruption of Tammany Hall and the New York police force. Two days later, Becker's men murdered Rosenthal on the steps of the Metropole. Becker and four of his men went to the electric chair for their part in the crime.

The Black Sox Fix of 1919

The 1919 World Series was the focus of a scandal that sent shock waves around the sports world. The Chicago White Sox were heavily favored to win the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. Due to low game attendance during World War I, players' salaries were cut back. In defiance, the White Sox threatened to strike against their owner, Charles Comiskey, who had refused to pay them a higher salary. The team's first baseman, Arnold "Chick" Gandil, approached a bookmaker and gambler, Joseph Sullivan, with an offer to intentionally lose the series. Eight players, including left fielder Shoeless Joe Jackson, participated in the scam. With the help of Arnold Rothstein, Sullivan raised the money to pay the players, and began placing bets that the White Sox would lose. The Sox proceeded to suffer one of the greatest sports upsets in history, and lost three games to five. When the scandal was exposed, due to a number of civil cases involving financial losses on the part of those who betted for the Sox, the eight players were banned from baseball for life and branded the "Black Sox." In the novel, Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheimer was "the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919." Shocked, Nick thinks to himself, "It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe." Gatsby himself is tied to possibly shady dealings throughout the course of the book. He takes mysterious phone calls and steps aside for private, undisclosed conversations. It was said that "one time he killed a man who found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil."

The Cover Artwork

Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, commissioned a full-color, illustrated jacket design from the Spanish artist Francis Cugat. Cugat had worked previously on movie poster and sets and was employed as a designer in Hollywood. The Art Deco piece that he produced for the novel shows the outlined eyes of a woman looking out of a midnight blue sky above the carnival lights of Coney Island in Manhattan. The piece was completed seven months before the novel, and Fitzgerald may have used it to inspire his own imagery. He calls Daisy the "girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs" of New York.

The Great Gatsby: Critical Overview

Just before *The Great Gatsby* was to appear—with a publication date of April 10, 1925—the Fitzgeralds were in the south of France. Fitzgerald was waiting for news from Max Perkins, his publisher, and cabled him to request "Any News." The 29-year-old author had won critical acclaim for his first novel, [This Side of Paradise](#), but had faltered with the less-than-perfect *The Beautiful and the Damned*. He was earnest about being considered one of the top American writers of his time, and needed the boost that his third novel might give him to achieve that status.

During his lifetime, Fitzgerald was generally praised for *The Great Gatsby*; it is usually considered to be his finest accomplishment and the one most analyzed by literary critics. The established opinion, according to biographer Arthur Mizener in *The Far Side of Paradise*, is best represented by renowned critic Lionel Trilling: "Except once, Fitzgerald did not fully realize his powers.... But [his] quality was a great one and on one occasion, in *The Great Gatsby*, it was as finely crystallized in art as it deserved to be." *Saturday Review* critic William Rose Benét said that the book "revealed matured craftsmanship." Even harsh critics like [Ernest Hemingway](#) and H. L. Mencken praised the writer, as quoted by Mizener. Said the notoriously abrasive Mencken in a letter to the author: "I think it is incomparably the best piece of work you have done." Nevertheless, he qualified this compliment with a complaint that the basic story was "somewhat trivial, that it reduces itself, in the end, to a sort of anecdote." Ring Lardner liked it "enormously" but his praise was too thin, for Fitzgerald's tastes: "The plot held my interest ... and I found no tedious moments. Altogether I think it's the best thing you've done since [Paradise](#)." Some of the initial reviews in newspapers called the book unsubstantial, since Fitzgerald dealt with unattractive characters in a superficially glittery setting. His friend, Edmund Wilson, called it "the best thing you have done—the best planned, the best sustained, the best written." All reviews, good and bad, affected Fitzgerald deeply.

From an artistic perspective, Fitzgerald's third novel was as close to a triumph as he would ever get. Financially, however, the book was a failure since he was over \$6200 in debt to Scribner's, his publisher, and sales of the book did not cover this by October of 1925. By February, a few more books were sold and then sales leveled out. The summer of 1925 for Fitzgerald was one of "1000 parties and no work." His drinking continued to affect his work. For the rest of his life, nothing he wrote quite measured up to *Gatsby*. In fact, when he walked into a book shop in Los Angeles and requested one of his books, he discovered they were out of print.

In the early 1950s, Fitzgerald's works began to enjoy a revival; in addition to *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, with its psychological bent, appealed to readers. Critics found similarities between Fitzgerald and English poet [John Keats](#) and novelist Joseph Conrad. Joseph N. Riddel and James Tuttleton analyzed American-born novelist Henry James's impact on Fitzgerald, since both men wrote about the manners of a particular culture. *Gatsby* was compared to T. S. Eliot's poem [The Waste Land](#) and to Ernest Hemingway's novel [The Sun Also Rises](#). The mythic elements of the novel have been studied by Douglas Taylor, Robert Stallman, and briefly by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*.

Symbolism in *Gatsby* focuses on Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's eyes, the Wasteland motif, and the color symbolism. *Gatsby* has ironically been likened to Christ, and Nick Carraway, the storyteller, to Nicodemus, in a Christian interpretation of the novel. Relatively speaking, most of Fitzgerald's short stories have been sorely neglected by critics, though a steady stream of critical comment appears every year. It has been difficult for critics to detach Fitzgerald the writer from Fitzgerald the legend. Sociological, historical, and biographical approaches to teaching literature have predominated in past decades. Now, more attention is being given to a close reading of *Gatsby* for its artistry.

The Great Gatsby: Character Analysis

Jordan Baker

Jordan Baker is an attractive, impulsive, childhood friend of Daisy Buchanan. She is the first person to bring up the subject of *Gatsby* to Nick Carraway. She also relates the sad story of his relationship with Daisy and Daisy's doomed marriage to the philandering Tom Buchanan. While intrigued by her good looks, Nick recalls that he saw her picture in photos of the sporting life at Asheville, Hot Springs, and Palm Beach in connection with a "critical, unpleasant story." The reader later discovers this concerns a time she cheated in a major golf tournament. Her insincerity with Nick in their love affair is another example of her detached personality. When she first appears in the novel, she is lounging on a sofa with Daisy "as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire," like two princesses in an unreal world. Both women use and dispose of people, as *Gatsby* and Nick experience firsthand. In Fitzgerald's long line of sensual, modern flapper characters, Jordan is one of the most well-known. There is an amoral aura about her, and her world revolves around herself and false material values. Jordan is distinguished from Daisy in her hard, unsentimental view of romance.

Daisy Buchanan

Daisy Buchanan is one of the true "Golden Girls" of Fitzgerald's stories, the wealthy, hard-to-get debutante. In this book, she is the love interest of Jay *Gatsby*, who builds his mansion for her, and views her East Egg home from the point of its green light. She is the cousin of Nick Carraway, and was brought up in Louisville society. She was the young love of *Gatsby* when he was a soldier. He does not see her after he is called to battle overseas. During the interim, she meets Tom Buchanan and marries him. At first happy in this marriage, she later discovers that Tom is having affairs. She withdraws into a dream world, yet never loses interest in the illusion of her love with *Gatsby*. Daisy flirts with him and entertains his obsessive interest until she commits murder and he takes the rap. Then, she hides behind the protection of her husband, a cruel brute, who uses and abuses people. Moreover, Daisy's voice is the voice of money, as Nick discovers. Her whole careless

world revolves around this illusion: that money makes everything beautiful, even if it is not. The danger is, like Gatsby, she carries the “well-forgotten dreams from age to age.” Her spiritual lightness parallels her material wealth, and she hides behind Tom when Gatsby is in danger.

From the film The Great Gatsby, starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, Paramount, 1974.

Tom Buchanan

Tom Buchanan is the villain of this novel and has Nazi-like theories of race. Nick knew him from Yale and describes him as “one of the most powerful ends that ever played football” there. From an “enormously wealthy” family, he brings a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest, Illinois, to the East. He and Daisy spend a year in France and “drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together,” before ending up in East Egg. After college, Tom changes and becomes, the writer notes, a blond thirty-year-old with a “rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner.” He tells Nick that, based on a book Tom has read and obviously reveres, “The Rise of the Colored Empires,” civilization is “going to pieces” and that the white race will be “submerged.” Nick observes that Tom and Daisy belonged to a “secret society” that ruined, through their insensitivity and carelessness, other peoples' lives. Tom is demeaning to George Wilson, his mistress's husband, who owns a garage in the wasteland between New York and East Egg. He also mistreats Myrtle herself, whom he violently hits in front of her sister and Nick when she mentions Daisy's name. The overall impression the reader has of this character is his physical power and brute strength. He is a fairly one-dimensional figure in this sense. Tom is indirectly responsible for Gatsby's death because he uses Wilson's hatred and jealousy against Gatsby in making Wilson believe that Myrtle was Gatsby's mistress.

Nick Carraway

The character of Nick Carraway functions prominently in this novel. He is a transplanted Midwesterner who buys a house in West Egg and sells bonds on Wall Street in New York City. Young and attractive, Nick becomes friends with Jordan Baker at a dinner party, where he is reunited with his cousin, Daisy. Nick, who claims to be the only honest person he knows, succumbs to the lavish recklessness of his neighbors and the knowledge of the secret moral entanglements that comprise their essentially hollow lives. While he is physically attracted to Jordan, he recognizes her basic dishonesty and inability to commit to a relationship. He muses on the loss of his innocence and youth when he is with her on his thirtieth birthday and sees himself driving on a road “toward death through the cooling twilight.” Lacking the romantic vision of Gatsby, Nick sees life now as it is. Nick deduces that Gatsby is both a racketeer and an incurable romantic, whose ill-gotten wealth has been acquired solely to gain prominence in the sophisticated, moneyed world of Daisy's circle.

Nick is the moral center of the book. From his perspective, we see the characters misbehave or behave admirably. In keeping with Nick's code of conduct, inherited from his father, we learn from the very beginning of the novel that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” about people because whenever he feels

compelled to criticize someone he remembers “that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.” His father also told him, prophetically, that “a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.” At the novel's end, most readers find that Nick is more akin to Gatsby than to any other character in the book. Insofar as Gatsby represents the simplicity of heart Fitzgerald associated with the Midwest, he is really a great man. His ignorance of his real greatness and misunderstanding of his notoriety endear him to Nick, who tells him he is better than the “whole rotten bunch put together.”

Ewing

See Mr. Klipspringer

Jay Gatsby

One of the most fascinating figures in American literary history, Jay Gatsby is a self-created personage, the embodiment of the American Dream. As Nick discovers, Gatsby's parents were poor farmers, whom he had never accepted as his parents. “The truth was that Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.” He developed out of an idealization of the American Dream, and the Golden Girl who personified that. One day, while attending a small Lutheran college in southern Minnesota and feeling dismayed by having to work as a janitor to put himself through school, Gatsby spots the moored yacht of Dan Cody. In an action that changes the young boy's life, Cody welcomes him aboard his yacht and introduces him to fine living. Gatsby becomes the protege of the wealthy goldminer and lives with him until Cody dies. With some wealth of his own and dreams of more, he goes into the army.

His fate is truly sealed when he meets the most popular girl in the Alabama town near his army post. She becomes the embodiment of the American Dream for him instantly, and from that moment they fall in love and he is determined to have the girl named Daisy. He becomes impressed with her beautiful home and many boyfriends. Perhaps attracted to her material value, she becomes his sole reason for being. When he considers his penniless state, he vows never to lose her in that way again, for while he is called to fight and is away at war, she marries a wealthy Midwesterner named Tom Buchanan. Gatsby commits himself to “the following of a grail” in his pursuit of her and what she represents. This obsession is characteristic of a dreamer like Gatsby, who loses a sense of reality but rather believes in “a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.”

Jay Gatsby successfully completes his military obligation and attends Oxford afterwards. He then returns to America and becomes involved in a drug ring. In his criminal affairs, he quickly gains wealth. The next time he sees Daisy, however, she is married to Tom Buchanan and lives on Long Island. To be close to her, Gatsby buys a mansion across the bay and gives extravagant parties in the hopes that Daisy will come to one. He discovers that Nick is a distant cousin of Daisy and gets Nick to take him to see her.

Gatsby's parties are vulgar, in spite of his polite manners, and he lacks a sense of security despite the outward manifestation of his ego. Nevertheless, his loyalty to his dream and idealism mark him as one of the tragic heroes in American literature.

Mr. Klipspringer

Mr. Klipspringer is a hanger-on, who lives off Gatsby by boarding at his mansion. He does liver exercises on the floor when Nick tours with Daisy and Gatsby. A “dishevelled man in pajamas,” he gives nothing back to Gatsby. Gatsby compliments Klipspringer, or Ewing, as he calls him, for his piano playing of popular songs. One of these features the lines: “One thing's sure and nothing's surer / The rich get richer and the poor get children / Ain't we got fun?” As most of the characters' names in Fitzgerald's stories, Klipspringer resonates as the name of someone who jumps around and “clips” or robs people of something.

Michaelis

Michaelis is a coffee-store owner who lives next to the Wilsons. He is the chief witness at the inquest about

Myrtle's death.

Owl Eyes

This minor character illuminates the character of Jay Gatsby. He finds that the books in Gatsby's library are real, even though the pages are uncut. Like the books, Gatsby is the real thing, but unformed, unlettered, and for all his financial cunning, ignorant.

Furthermore, the ocular imagery in the book is enhanced by this character's role since various acquaintances of the mysterious Gatsby lend their truth to his real story.

George Wilson

George Wilson feels henpecked by his wife Myrtle. A victim of circumstance, he has a poor life and can only work to make a living and must ask the man who is having an affair with his wife, Tom Buchanan, for a car with which to move away. Full of anger and frustration about his wife's disloyalty, Wilson acts on his impulses and kills someone who is just as much a victim of the Buchanans as he. According to Nick, "he was a blonde, spiritless man, anemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us ... hope sprang into his light blue eyes." He is a true product of the wasteland between the suburban world of wealth and New York City.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle Wilson is the mistress of Tom Buchanan and wife of George Wilson, men representing distinctly separate classes on the social spectrum. Myrtle clearly aspires to a life of wealth with Tom, who humors her with gifts: a puppy, clothes, and various personal items. Nick describes her as a stout woman in her mid-30s, who carries "her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can." She has a vitality and ignores her husband "as if he were a ghost" when Tom appears. She is another one of Tom's victims, since he physically hits her in the face at her mention of Daisy's name, and is murdered by a speeding car she thinks belongs to Tom, as she rushes out to greet it.

Meyer Wolfsheim

Meyer Wolfsheim is one of Jay Gatsby's underworld contacts in bootlegging and racketeering. Fitzgerald based this character on a real gangster who fixed the 1919 World Series, Arnold Rothstein. We see Wolfsheim at the Metropole and in dark settings. One of Wolfsheim's notable characteristics is his wearing of cufflinks made of human molars. He is so selfish and insecure that he refuses to attend Gatsby's funeral. Nick sees the gangster part of Gatsby's life as one of the ways he made his money, but he separates Gatsby's character from true insensitive, subhuman criminals like Wolfsheim. Gatsby stands by Daisy when she commits a crime, but Wolfsheim will not honor his relationships.

The Great Gatsby: Essays and Criticism

Three Themes in The Great Gatsby

Whilst *The Great Gatsby* explores a number of themes, none is more prevalent than that of the corruption of the American dream. The American dream is the concept that, in America, any person can be successful as long as he or she is prepared to work hard and use his natural gifts.

Gatsby appears to be the embodiment of this dream—he has risen from being a poor farm boy with no prospects to being rich, having a big house, servants, and a large social circle attending his numerous functions. He has achieved all this in only a few short years, having returned from the war penniless.

On the surface, Fitzgerald appears to be suggesting that, whilst wealth and all its trappings are attainable, status and position are not. Whilst Gatsby has money and possessions, he is unable to find happiness. Those who

come to his home do not genuinely like Gatsby—they come for the parties, the food, the drink and the company, not for Gatsby. Furthermore, they seem to despise Gatsby, taking every opportunity to gossip about him. Many come and go without even taking the time to meet and few ever thank him for his hospitality. Even Daisy appears unable to cope with the reality of Gatsby's lower class background. Gatsby is never truly one of the elite—his dream is just a façade.

However, Fitzgerald explores much more than the failure of the American dream—he is more deeply concerned with its total corruption. Gatsby has not achieved his wealth through honest hard work, but through bootlegging and crime. His money is not simply 'new' money—it is dirty money, earned through dishonesty and crime. His wealthy lifestyle is little more than a façade, as is the whole person Jay Gatsby. Gatsby has been created from the dreams of the boy James Gatz. It is not only Gatsby who is corrupt. Nick repeatedly says that he is the only honest person he knows. The story is full of lying and cheating. Even Nick is involved in this deception, helping Gatsby and Daisy in their deceit and later concealing the truth about Myrtle's death. The society in which the novel takes place is one of moral decadence. Whether their money is inherited or earned, its inhabitants are morally decadent, living life in quest of cheap thrills and with no seeming moral purpose to their lives. Any person who attempts to move up through the social classes becomes corrupt in the process. In Gatsby's case this corruption involves illegal activities, for Myrtle it is an abandonment of others of her own background.

A parallel theme of the book is that of love and its fleetingness. There are no stable relationships in the book. Daisy and Tom's marriage has been damaged by affairs from early in its life. Soon after their honeymoon Tom has been caught out, when a hotel chambermaid is injured in a car crash where he is the driver. By the time the novel begins, Daisy is well aware of Tom's regular affairs, seeming to suffer in silence until Gatsby offers her a way out. Myrtle's relationship with Tom is no stronger, obviously based on a physical attraction, especially on the part of Tom, who has little time for Myrtle outside the bedroom. Myrtle appears to be loved by Wilson, but is unhappy in this relationship, apparently because he is unable to provide materially for her, although his actions in the latter part of the book suggest his love may be oppressive, causing her to seek escape even before the last events.

Other characters in the book are no more successful in relationships. Nick, the narrator, is unable to make commitments in his relationships. One of his reasons for coming East has been to escape a potential engagement. He has a brief affair in New York, which he ends when there are signs of commitment, and he cannot commit to Jordan either. Jordan herself has had no lasting relationship, discarding men when she has no further use for them—Nick's rejection of her provides her with 'a new experience.' Partygoers are seen fighting with spouses or else attend with mistresses or lovers.

Only Gatsby seems capable of lasting love—his love for Daisy is unshaken till the end. Yet this love is unrealistic—based not only on a relationship started on a lie, but also needing a turning back of time to make it complete. At times even Gatsby himself seems to realize that the reality is not as good as his dream has been.

In the end we meet the only person capable of true love in the final chapter. It is Mr Gatz, Gatsby's father, who has an unshaken love for his son, believing in him to the end, and blind to his failings as only a parent can be.

A third theme in the novel is that of optimism. It is Gatsby's almost unwavering optimism that guides him through life. His belief that dreams can come true has been with him since a lad, and the dream represented by the green light on Daisy's dock holds incredible promise for him. Even when the dream starts to unravel, when Daisy's feelings have wavered as his past is revealed, Gatsby remains optimistic. He does not take his chance to leave the area, certain that Daisy will come back to him. In this way his untimely death is merciful—his life has so long been based on a dream that Daisy's desertion would have been crippling to him. In closing, Nick realizes that what Gatsby did not see was that his dream was already behind him—his opportunity had been

missed and could not be recaptured.

Major and Minor Characters in The Great Gatsby

Daisy Buchanon

Daisy was born Daisy Fay in Louisville, Kentucky, a daughter of Louisville society and Nick Carraway's cousin. Like the flower for which she is named, Daisy is delicate and lovely. She also shows a certain weakness that simultaneously attracts men to her and causes her to be easily swayed. Daisy's weakness influences the major points of the story, and she is responsible, if not intentionally, for the novel's tragic ending.

Daisy first met Jay Gatsby in 1917, when he was stationed at Camp Taylor in Louisville. The two fell in love quickly, and Daisy promised to remain loyal to Gatsby when he shipped out to join the fighting. Two years later, she married Tom Buchanon because he bought her an expensive necklace, with the promise of a life of similar extravagance. Daisy is definitely distracted by wealth and power, and despite her husband's unfaithfulness, she insists she still loves him because of his influence.

Gatsby is another matter entirely. Although she left him because he couldn't provide for her the way Tom could, she retained some glimmer of emotional connection to him. When Gatsby finally professes his love over tea, she responds positively. But is she renewing an old love, or manipulating Gatsby? The novel doesn't give us any clear idea.

Daisy is described in glowing terms in the novel, although her value seems to be connected to monetary value. In chapter 7, for example, Nick and Gatsby have the following famous exchange:

"She's got an indiscreet voice," I remarked. "It's full of —" I hesitated.

"Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.

That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl.... (120)

Daisy is an ideal, and Fitzgerald gives her the qualities to not only live up to that ideal but to also bring it crashing down around her. Daisy's myth is as big as Gatsby's, at least in Gatsby's mind; like him, she took the necessary opportunities to make herself what she wanted to be. Tom takes good care of her financially and is even jealous when he realizes, in chapter 7, that Gatsby is in love with his wife. Later, Nick clears up at least part of the mystery Daisy presents: "She was the first 'nice' girl he'd ever known" (148; ch. 8). Nick's use of quotes for the term "nice" shows that Daisy hardly fits the ideal image Gatsby invests her with.

Like money, Daisy promises far more than she is capable of providing. She is perfect but flawed, better as an image than as a flesh-and-blood person. Daisy was in large part based on Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, who he both worshipped and distrusted. Daisy's money is her protection, her power, and her defense against any accusation that might come her way.

When Myrtle Wilson is killed by Daisy's careless driving, she hides behind both money (in the form of Tom and Gatsby) and Gatsby's love. Gatsby is the only true witness, but he takes the blame for her. Rather than renew their month-long affair, Daisy disappears into her opulent house, retreating into the only security she knows. She continues her almost ghostly existence, leaving the men in her life to clean up the mess.

Daisy's confused sense of loyalty is evident in her disappearance before Gatsby's funeral—she and Tom move away almost immediately, leaving no forwarding address for Nick or anyone else. An even bigger insight is Daisy's infrequent mentions of her own daughter, who is only briefly discussed in the first chapter and in chapter 7. The child is nothing more than an afterthought, as she is unable to give Daisy anything but love, which she has in abundance. Daisy is incapable of caring for her infant—one assumes a governess or nanny takes care of her—any more than she is able to truly love Tom or Gatsby. She doesn't love them as men, it seems, but as sources of revenue.

Daisy is capable of affection. She seems to have some loyalty to Tom, and even a certain devotion to Gatsby, or at least to the memory of their earlier time together. However, like money, Daisy is elusive and hard to hold onto. This may explain why Tom and Gatsby fight over her in chapter 7 as if she were an object:

“Your wife doesn't love you,” said Gatsby. “She's never loved you. She loves me.”

“You must be crazy!” exclaimed Tom automatically.

Gatsby sprang to his feet, vivid with excitement. “She never loved you, do you hear?” he cried. “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!” ...

“Sit down, Daisy,” Tom's voice groped unsuccessfully for the paternal note. (130-131)

The tone of the argument seems almost like that of two men fighting over the pot in a poker game. Daisy is a prize, and she seems to see herself in those terms. In this sense, Daisy is far from what one would call a “feminist” character; rather, she is a symbol of shallow beauty, and of the amoral worlds of both East and West Egg.

Jay Gatsby

In the first two chapters of the novel, its title character is a mystery—a wealthy, fun-loving local celebrity with a shady past who throws lavish weekly parties. On the surface, Gatsby is an example of the American Dream in the 1920s, the desire for wealth, love and power.

As the novel progresses, we see Gatsby more as a man than a mythical figure, and we discover that the myth of the “Great Gatsby” (as in the “Great Houdini,” an escape artist of the time) is created by Gatsby himself. He is truly a “self-made man, a fiction whose past and obsessions finally destroy him.

Jay Gatsby was born James Gatz, the son of a poor farmer in North Dakota. From an early age, Gatz was aware of his family's poverty, and he swore he would attain the wealth and sophistication his childhood lacked (including, apparently, a fake British accent). Once out of high school, Gatz changed his name to Jay Gatsby and attended St. Olaf's College to begin his climb to the distinction he craved. Unfortunately, Gatsby had to take a janitor's job to pay his tuition; he left St. Olaf's in disgust after two weeks.

Gatsby's true education came at the hands of Dan Cody, an older man who teaches him the ways of the world in 5 years aboard Cody's boat, the Tuolomee, on Lake Superior. Cody, a hard drinker and womanizer, was Gatsby's role model more in teaching him what not to do. Gatsby rarely drinks, and is distant at his own lavish parties. He wants the success Cody achieved without the destructive habits that success afforded him.

After Cody died at the hands of a mistress, Gatsby joined the army and World War I. While stationed in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1917, Gatsby met a young Daisy Fay, a daughter of Louisville society. Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, lied about his background, and vowed to someday be good enough to win her heart. Gatsby believed Daisy's promise to wait for him, but he returned to Louisville as she and Tom were on their

honeymoon. Devastated, Gatsby went to Oxford in England for the education that would complete his transformation from poor farm boy to famous (or infamous) socialite.

Gatsby's only true dream is Daisy's love; the parties he gives at his lavish West Egg mansion are purely to lure her to him the way he stares at the green light from her dock late at night. He begs Nick to set up a rendezvous with Daisy for him, which Nick does. Their love rekindles for a short time, and Gatsby's unrealistic view of Daisy as the picture of perfection is renewed. It is this view that eventually causes Gatsby's death.

In a confrontation at the Plaza Hotel, Tom openly accuses Gatsby of criminal activities, including bootlegging. Tom knows about Gatsby and Wolfsheimer's "drugstores" that sell illegal grain alcohol, as well as other, more mysterious crimes. Gatsby handles the accusation with cool calm, but is devastated by Daisy's assertion that she does indeed love her husband.

In a last-ditch effort to prove his love to Daisy, Gatsby takes the blame when she accidentally hits Myrtle Wilson in Gatsby's car. Tom Buchanan tells Myrtle's husband, George, that Gatsby was driving the car, hinting that the two may have been having an affair. At this point, the Gatsby myth returns full force, as an enraged, jealous Wilson shoots Gatsby dead, then kills himself.

Jay Gatsby dies that night, and James Gatz along with him, anonymous and alone. Gatsby's obsession with Daisy causes him to lie his way to his standing in the community, lie about his life, and lie to protect Daisy from a fate that is transferred to him. Despite all that Jay Gatsby does, James Gatz lies just beneath the surface, simply wanting to be loved. The other activities are meaningless compared to the month he spends as Daisy's lover. An authentic Jay Gatsby might be too detached, too crafty, to get caught up in Myrtle Wilson's death, but James Gatz can't hope to distance himself from one last charitable act—trying to protect the woman he loves. Gatsby can easily be seen as a negative character—a liar, a cheat, a criminal—but Fitzgerald makes certain we see the soul of James Gatz behind the myth of Jay Gatsby.

Gatsby/Gatz is in fact a tragic character motivated by love. He is also hopelessly flawed, a shadow that is incapable of a life without Daisy, even if she's only living across the lake.

Fitzgerald ties Gatsby up with the American Dream, a dream of individualism and success with a purpose. Like the America of the 1920s, Gatsby loses sight of his original dream and replaces it with an unhealthy obsession—for the country, the pursuit of wealth for its own sake; for Gatsby, a sense of control over Daisy as evidenced by both him and Tom in the Plaza Hotel. Gatsby is symbolic of a nation whose great wealth and power has blinded it to more human concerns.

Gatsby's Romantic idealism, which Nick calls "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (2; ch. 1), is all that drives him, and no enterprise that enables him to get what he craves is too extreme. In this sense, Gatsby could be considered more amoral than immoral—morality simply has no meaning for him so long as he makes his dream come true. Everything is simply a means to an end, and Gatsby represents those for whom the end is the only thing that is important.

Nick Carraway

Nick is the narrator of the novel; the story is told in his voice and through his perceptions. It has also been suggested that Nick may be the character [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) based most closely on himself. In a sense, then, Nick may show Fitzgerald's own opinions of wealthy, immoral characters like Gatsby.

Nick is a good Midwestern boy who attended Yale and moved to New York in 1922 to work in the bond market. He is well-positioned to narrate this story—he is Daisy Buchanan's cousin, went to Yale with Tom Buchanan, and rents the house next door to Gatsby's. From his vantage point, Nick can see everything that

goes on. What's more, he's the kind of guy that people want to tell their stories—and their secrets—to.

Nick tells us in the first chapter that his father cautioned him about judging people: “‘Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had’” (1). Nick tries to follow his father’s advice; he acts as a sounding board for the other characters, particularly Gatsby, and as they confide in him, we learn more about their lives.

There is debate over whether Nick is a Reliable Narrator—this is, if he tells us the whole truth about what he sees, hears, and experiences. In the beginning of the novel, Nick certainly seems reliable. But as he says, tolerance of others “has a limit” (2, ch. 1)). Gatsby represents everything Nick hates about the East, with its emphasis on money and status and its lack of morality. For some reason—perhaps because he’s fascinated by Gatsby in the beginning, then friends with him despite Gatsby’s crimes—Nick extends his limit, learning more about both the East and himself in the process.

As much as Nick hates about the East, he experiences internal conflict about the things he does like. The fast pace of New York and the focus on having fun intrigues him; as a Midwesterner, he knows his limits, unlike those surrounding him. He is driven to have fun at Gatsby’s weekly parties and to “burn his candle at both ends,” but he also wants to maintain the organized, simple lifestyle he knows from back home.

His relationship with Jordan Baker also couldn’t happen anywhere but in New York. When he meets her in chapter 1, Nick remembers “some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago” (18). His forgetfulness seems to come from his close attention to her—“I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet” (11). He goes on to describe the last rays of daylight “deserting her with lingering regret” (14) and the “autumn-leaf yellow of her hair” (17). The atmosphere of West Egg enables Nick to forget whatever he’s heard about Jordan when he watches her and listens to her frank opinions. He becomes infatuated quickly.

Daisy determines to fix Nick and Jordan up, and tells Jordan Nick will look after her. Nick doesn’t protest. It’s at this point that we hear about Nick’s fractured romance out West—or so Daisy believes. Nick tells us that he dated a friend and that the rumors of their marriage drove him to leave. Nick is careful about revealing personal details of his past, a bit like Fitzgerald himself. He does let us know he is disgusted and touched at the same time that Daisy would even care about his failed relationship.

In chapter 3, Jordan becomes Nick’s “date” for a party after he drinks too much in embarrassment over asking where Gatsby is (which is, apparently, not a good idea, even at Gatsby’s party). They wander the grounds, chatting with other party guests (including Jordan’s real date, an anonymous undergraduate) until “the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound” (47). This night also marks the first time Nick meets Gatsby. It seems that Nick equates Jordan and Gatsby in his mind; in a sense, his farewell to Gatsby the night of the broken wheel could be a “kiss goodnight” from Jordan.

Later in the chapter, Nick sees Jordan again, after she has become a golf champion. He admits that “I wasn’t actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity” (57). He follows that observation with another—“She was incurably dishonest” (58). We will discover along with Nick later in the novel that Gatsby is also “incurably dishonest”; however, these characters are the ones Nick feels drawn to. Nick says, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (59), almost as if honesty is a failing compared to Jordan and Gatsby.

Nick grows closer and closer to Gatsby as the novel progresses. He learns, first through Jordan then from Gatsby himself, that Gatsby’s only goal in life is to be reunited with Daisy. Nick then finds himself in the same position Daisy claims she is in with Jordan and himself—except in this case, the matchmaking is meant to be serious. This makes Nick understandably uncomfortable, as his Midwestern upbringing taught him

marriage was sacred; also, knowing Gatsby as well as he does, he doesn't seem sure that he'd want Gatsby marrying his cousin.

Gatsby does gallantly take the blame for Daisy's car accident, causing more internal conflict for Nick. Tom lies to Wilson, which results in Gatsby's death. Nick is surrounded by deceit and violence, and he is disgusted by it. He determines that Gatsby, for all his faults, may be the only person he knows with any character at all. This, too, throws Nick into confusion. He arranges a small funeral for Gatsby and ends his relationship with Jordan; in a sense, Nick can't have a relationship with someone he associates so closely with his friend.

At the novel's end, Nick moves back to the Midwest to escape the disgust he feels for the people surrounding Gatsby's life and for the emptiness and moral decay of life among the wealthy on the East Coast. He comes to a realization about that life: "I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life" (176).

This is the point where Fitzgerald and his opinions speak the most clearly through Nick. Just as Gatsby's dream of Daisy was corrupted by money and deceit, the American dream of happiness and individualism has fallen apart, replaced by the mere pursuit of wealth. Nick, who was in awe of Gatsby's power to transform his dreams into reality, realizes that the dream—for Gatsby and for America—is over, and no power in the world can bring it back.

Nick's character develops from a relatively objective observer to a full participant in the action of the novel, both physically and emotionally. As a result, perhaps his reliability as a narrator changes as well. How much of the other characters' actions and reactions are just observed, and how much is filtered through Nick's perceptions of them? His promise to his father at the beginning is compromised by the reality around him. The "advantages [he's] had" were the simple adherence to a code that doesn't apply to New York or to the world of Jay Gatsby. When he loses those advantages, Nick returns to find what he has lost.

Tom Buchanon

Unlike Gatsby, who is a sort of tragic figure, Tom Buchanon is just a bully. He played football at Yale, where he attended with Nick Carraway, and he also comes from a wealthy Midwestern family. Tom is a big brute of a man who uses both his physical and financial "superiority" to get what he wants.

Tom's sense of fragile superiority is evident from chapter 1, in which he mentions a book he has read called "Rise of the Colored Empires." Tom says, "'The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved'" (12-13). Tom's life is comfortable and secure as long as he remains in control. Anything he doesn't control is a potential threat to his power.

Tom is having an ongoing affair with Myrtle Wilson, whose husband George runs a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Tom maintains an apartment for Myrtle in New York City (he takes Nick to the apartment in chapter 2), but he is also physically abusive. Ironically, although Tom is having an open affair, he becomes enraged when he discovers that Daisy and Gatsby have renewed their love affair.

In typical fashion, Tom brings his wife's affair with Gatsby out in the open at the Plaza Hotel by asking "What kind of row are you trying to cause in my house anyway?" The fact that he is himself having an affair is unimportant; Gatsby is causing trouble in his house, with his wife—essentially, his property. Tom verbally beats down both Gatsby and Daisy until his wife acknowledges she loves him. It doesn't matter whether Daisy loves him; Tom simply must be the victor. He is what we might call an "Alpha Male" today—a man who must be in charge at all times, and who jealously guards his "possessions," including his wife and mistress.

Fitzgerald consciously makes Tom—the Antagonist of the novel—without one redeeming quality. Tom’s outright evil helps make Gatsby a more sympathetic character despite his actions. Gatsby has committed crimes, but he has a good heart; Tom is a “model citizen,” but he has no heart to speak of. Fitzgerald forces us to ask ourselves, which is worse? Tom represents the decadence of 20th Century America for Fitzgerald—pure, unadulterated power tempered by nothing.

Tom seems to show no sadness at all when his mistress is killed, by his wife of all people. He takes Myrtle’s death as an opportunity to get back at Gatsby once and for all by telling George Wilson Gatsby was driving the car that killed his wife, and that he was the one having an affair with Myrtle. Tom “wins,” but at what price? He whisks Daisy off to an unknown location, leaving Nick to clean up the mess they’ve made. He even bullies Nick into shaking his hand and considering the possibility that Tom’s behavior could be justified.

Tom’s hypocrisy is his calling card. Fitzgerald seems to be sarcastically celebrating Tom in a way as a new “antihero” who has no interest in [Romanticism](#) or morality, only in cold, hard cash. Most of the characters in West Egg could be considered amoral—they simply have no place for traditional morality in their lives or activities. Tom is an exception; he is immoral, in the sense that he looks morality in the eye and rejects it. He is aware of his cruelty, and he seems to revel in it.

Tom is a pivotal character in the novel not only in his direct opposition to Gatsby but also in his relationship with Nick. Nick sees Tom for what he is, but like everyone else, he is too intimidated to do anything about it. Tom’s actions, particularly at the end, prompt Nick to return to the Midwest to the values he grew up with.

Minor Characters

Each of the minor characters in *The Great Gatsby* has a specific role to play in the unfolding of the story and in the relationships between the main characters; many offer symbolic touchstones to “fill out” Fitzgerald’s symbolic landscape:

Jordan Baker

Jordan functions as the opposite of Daisy Buchanon—she is a fully liberated woman of the 20s. A professional golfer, Jordan has a brief affair with Nick, which seems to go nowhere. Jordan is presented as a dishonest person who will do anything to win, including alleged cheating in a golf tournament. Jordan’s amorality is a bit more cynical than the other West Eggers’; she adopts whatever morals seem to fit her current situation

Jordan’s most important role in the novel is that of a go-between; she introduces Nick to Gatsby, and as Daisy’s close friend, she fills in gaps in Nick’s (and our own) knowledge of Daisy. Fitzgerald (through Nick) refers to Nick’s relationship with Jordan in only the briefest of terms. This seems to serve two functions: to show how shallow relationships in West Egg are, and to provide a cool comparison to the affair between Gatsby and Daisy.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle, who Fitzgerald describes as “sensuous” and “vital,” is Tom Buchanon’s mistress. She is married, unhappily, to George Wilson, who owns a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Myrtle functions as an emotional foil for Daisy (Myrtle is far more emotional, and more willing to show it) and as a catalyst for the novel’s ending. After a fight with George over his suspicion of an affair, Myrtle runs into the street, only to be hit and killed by Gatsby’s car, with Daisy at the wheel.

George Wilson

George Wilson is a mechanic who expects little, especially from his wife Myrtle. He is content with his simple life (as content as his wife is not content) until he suspects Myrtle of having an affair, possibly with Tom. George’s primary function in the novel is to kill Gatsby; when Tom Buchanon suggests that Myrtle is

having an affair with Gatsby and that Gatsby was driving the car that kills her, George kills Gatsby, then commits suicide.

Meyer Wolfsheim

Wolfsheim is a “business associate” of Jay Gatsby’s, and a well-known Mafioso. He is an allusion to Al Capone and other 20s gangsters, a mixture of criminal activity and refinement. In addition to allegedly “fixing” the 1919 World Series, Wolfsheim owns a number of “drugstores” with Gatsby that are actually fronts for bootleg grain alcohol. Ironically, he is one of the few characters who knew Gatsby to express regret upon Gatsby’s death.

Henry Gatz

Henry Gatz is the father of James Gatz (aka Jay Gatsby), an elderly man who has been dependent on Gatsby for his livelihood. Gatz appears briefly in the novel to show Gatsby’s compassionate side, and his dedication to improving himself and his life.

Dan Cody

Cody takes on a young James Gatz and shows him what “the other side of life” is all about. Gatz takes on the name “Jay Gatsby” when he meets Cody, and uses Cody’s example, both positive and negative, in forming his new identity.

Michaelis

Michaelis puts the “Minor” in “Minor Characters.” He is a Greek neighbor of the Wilsons who tries to console Wilson after Myrtle’s death. He runs the coffee shop beside the ash heaps and is the principal witness at the inquest.

Catherine

Catherine is Myrtle Wilson’s sister. She lives in New York City and receives a visit from Nick, Tom and Myrtle. She appears after her sister’s death very drunk and says nothing, which seems to be uncharacteristic for her.

The McKees

The McKees are Catherine’s neighbors in New York. He is in “the art game”; They are fixated on social status and fashion, and they provide Nick with a glimpse into the Myth of Jay Gatsby.

Ewing Klipspringer

Ewing Klipspringer is Gatsby’s boarder, who appears briefly.

Owl Eyes

“Owl Eyes” is a guest at Gatsby’s regular parties who wrecks his car in a ditch, a foreshadowing of the novel’s ending. He is one of the few who attend Gatsby’s funeral. He seems to be a longtime acquaintance of Gatsby’s, perhaps knowing more about him than the others.

Party Guests

The guests, none of whom have names, are identified by their clothing or their social status. They function as “human scenery” to develop the environment of Gatsby’s parties.

Dr. T. J. Eckelburg

Dr. Eckelburg, or rather his eyes on a billboard, appear as a sort of observer to the events of the novel, perhaps in contrast to Nick as he becomes more and more of a participant than an observer.

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Critique of American Upper Class Values

The Great Gatsby is known as the quintessential novel of the Jazz age. It accurately portrays the lifestyle of the rich during the booming 1920s. Readers live vicariously through the lavish parties and on the elegant estates. Romantics relate to Gatsby's unrelenting commitment to Daisy, the love of his life. But beneath all the decadence and romance, *The Great Gatsby* is a severe criticism of American upper class values.

Fitzgerald uses the book's central conflict between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby to illustrate his critique. Tom is the incarnation of the upper class, Gatsby the *nouveau riche*. The contrast between them demonstrates the differences between the values of their respective classes. In this essay we will examine the upper class myths of lineage, institutional education, manners, and wealth. One by one, Fitzgerald strips away the illusion of superiority to reveal the ugly truth behind the glittering façade of the rich.

Myth #1: The Importance of Lineage

For the "old" (inherited) money crowd, family lineage is often the first, and perhaps most important, indicator of class rank. This theme runs through the entire novel. Tom's old Chicago family is "enormously wealthy." In fact, "his position" was what attracted Daisy to him. And he adamantly argues his racial superiority during the opening scene. But his lineage does not translate into anything worthwhile. The Buchanans never see their families. The core of their own family, their marriage, is a shambles—Tom cheats and Daisy's miserable. And their daughter seems irrelevant to their lives.

Gatsby, on the other hand, is of unknown background. Rumors circulate that he is related to everyone from the Kaiser to Satan. Eventually we learn that Gatsby comes from a humble, midwestern family. He grew up poor. Ironically, the Gatsby (or Gatz) family provides the only examples of familial love. We learn that Gatsby bought his father a house, and his father cannot hide his emotion, his affection, and his admiration for his son in the final chapter.

Myth #2: The Importance of Institutional Education

Institutional education—where you go to school—holds an important place in class structure. Nick points out that he, his father, and Tom Buchanan attended New Haven, the discreet name for Yale, an institution that ranked with Harvard and Princeton as the school of the elite. However, Tom's attendance at one of the nation's finest universities does little to develop his "simple mind." At one point he even admits to being "pretty dumb." His crude attempts at intellectualism, for example his "scientific" explanation of the decline of civilization caused by "The Rise of the Colored Empires," only serve to reveal a dangerously thin understanding of the world.

By contrast, Gatsby's claim to institutional learning is sketchy. Whether or not Gatsby is a true "Oxford man" recurs throughout the story as a source of controversy. In fact, Tom considers a major victory Gatsby's revelation that his affiliation with the prestigious English school was only temporary. But despite his lack of formal education, we understand Gatsby to have a focused, intelligent mind. He literally pulls himself up from poverty to the heights of wealth through discipline and brains.

Myth #3: The Importance of Manners

Savoir faire, knowing what to do, and good manners, are qualities often attributed to the upper class. In fact, some elitists believe that this is how well-bred people distinguish themselves from others. Ironically, the most "well-bred" characters in the novel are often the worst behaved. Tom is the best example. Despite his breeding, he is abrupt, constantly rude, and even violent. In Chapter 2, he breaks his lover's nose when she

annoys him—an impolite action even in the most philistine circles.

Here again, manners highlight the difference between the classes. The low-born and self-made Gatsby is always the perfect gentleman. Even when his rival, Tom, stops by with his two snooty friends, he maintains his impeccable hosting ethic. And while his manners may come off as too stiff and formal, he is nonetheless portrayed as kind and considerate throughout. The narrator, Nick, goes so far as to call his gestures “gorgeous.”

Myth #4: The Importance of Wealth

The fourth myth associated with the upper class involves the preeminence of wealth. Fitzgerald goes to great lengths to describe Tom’s tremendous wealth, his estate, his cars, his polo ponies. But Tom’s wealth comes off as worthless. He is mean and stingy, and we never see him share his unearned fortune. In fact, it’s just the opposite. He denies the impoverished George Wilson one of his extra cars, despite Wilson’s desperate pleas.

On the contrary, the newly rich Gatsby spends his money freely. Stories of Gatsby’s generosity abound. He provides food, drinks, entertainment, and even shelter to hundreds of people, even those he did not invite. In one instance, he replaced a guest’s expensive evening gown that she accidentally tore at one of his parties. And unlike Tom, who receives money from his family, Gatsby generously gives money to his aging father.

By establishing the conflict between Tom and Gatsby, Fitzgerald mirrors the conflict between the upper and upwardly-aspiring classes in America. Fitzgerald’s characterizations and the narrator’s commentary criticize the rich throughout the book. Tom Buchanan, with his lineage, education, breeding and wealth, epitomizes the upper class. But by the end of the story, we realize that these qualities are empty. In one sweeping condemnation, Nick proclaims to Gatsby, “They’re a rotten crowd.... You’re worth the whole bunch put together” (154,; ch. 8). Fitzgerald finally and skillfully destroys the upper class claim to superiority.

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The Paradoxical Role of Women

Women play a paradoxical role in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a novel dominated by the eponymous hero and the enigmatic narrator, Nick Carraway. With the background of Gatsby’s continual and lavish parties, women seem to have been transformed into “flappers,” supposedly the incarnation of independence following World War I.

After all, Daisy Fay, obviously modeled on Fitzgerald’s free-spirited wife, Zelda Sayre, is hardly portrayed as the proper southern belle. Her friend, Jordan Baker, seems openly sarcastic when speaking of their “white girlhood”—referring to their youth spent in Louisville, Kentucky. As Fitzgerald conveys through a series of flashbacks, Daisy has been flirtatious, even at one point discovered packing her bag to travel alone to New York City in order to say good bye to a sailor. But her rather scandalous behavior does not sully her at all in the eyes of the smitten Gatsby. Indeed, as Nick comments, “It excited him ... that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes.” (149; ch. 8)

Jordan Baker, whom some critics regard as little more than a device to bring Nick Carraway into the plot, is neither married nor engaged and apparently lives largely on her own except for a shadowy aunt who serves as a titular chaperone. Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, might pontificate that their house guest should have more supervision, but Daisy ridicules her husband’s comment.

So on one level, these characters appear to be free-spirited, scorning norms of what the nineteenth century would have considered proper female behavior. It's worth investigating, however, just how independent they really are. Ultimately, their "place" may be indicated most exactly by using the title from a pioneering book of feminist criticism by Francoise Basch: *Relative Creatures*. Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle exist in relationship to their husbands, lovers, or boyfriends, and none undergoes a significant change during the course of the narrative. Thus, according to the most common definitions of flat versus round characters in literature, none of the women can be considered "round" or multidimensional characters. Each functions—at least for a time—as the cynosure of Gatsby, Nick and Tom Buchanan. Perhaps the ultimately pathetic condition of women is most accurately conveyed in a conversation between Nick and Daisy in which Daisy discusses the birth of her daughter:

“Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.’” (16-17; ch. 1)

Beyond the glittering, upper class world of East Egg, inhabited by Daisy and Tom Buchanan and Jordan Baker, is the squalid area Fitzgerald refers to as the “Valley of Ashes,” where George and Myrtle Wilson live. Myrtle, obviously bent on escaping this Waste Land where George ekes out a living as a mechanic, has become Tom’s mistress. Fitzgerald portrays her unflatteringly as crass, tasteless, overweight, and ostentatious.

At a drunken party in New York City when Myrtle oversteps one of Tom’s dubious moral lines by mentioning Daisy, he hits his mistress, breaking her nose. Later in the novel, she is imprisoned in the garage when her pathetic and obtuse husband finally realizes that she has been having an affair with someone. Significantly, however, Tom Buchanan walks away unscathed from this affair, while Myrtle dies in the Waste Land, mingling “her thick dark blood with the dust” (137; ch. 7). Myrtle’s executioner is the “careless” Daisy who has been driving Gatsby’s expensive gold car.

With Myrtle’s death her “tremendous vitality” is extinguished. While she differs from both Jordan and Daisy because of her socioeconomic class, this vitality is also a crucial point of difference, for Fitzgerald has pointedly characterized both young women by their profound ennui, their vacillation, and their carelessness. The discussions between Daisy and Jordan parallel passages from T. S. Eliot’s [The Waste Land](#) where the spiritually bankrupt representatives of all social classes wonder forlornly: “‘What shall we do ... / What shall we ever do?’” (133-134); Jordan and Daisy, spiritually and physically enervated, differ drastically from Myrtle “straining at the garage pump with panting vitality.” (68; ch. 4)

In their own ways, each woman functions as “proof” of her husband’s or lover’s success. At several points in the novel, Gatsby is described by Nick as a knight. Traditionally, knights go off on a quest; often their “price is the hand of a king’s daughter in marriage. Gatsby’s quest during his life has been to recapture the past, those moments in [World War I](#) when it seemed to him that Daisy, the wealthy, sought-after belle of Louisville, would agree to be his wife. Daisy, however, hardly constant, is swept off her feet by another suitor, Tom Buchanan. But Gatsby clings to his peculiar notion of the American Dream: if he achieves monetary success, he will regain Daisy. Thus, Gatsby constructs his ostentatious house in West Egg, directly across the Bay from Tom and Daisy’s more sedate mansion. Nick warns him, “‘You can’t repeat the past,’” but Gatsby, incredulous, states “‘Why of course you can!’” (110; ch. 6)

It would be ingenuous to ignore the parallels between the F. Scott Fitzgerald/Zelda Sayre marriage and the relationship of Daisy and Gatsby. Both Daisy and Zelda were considered “belles” of southern cities; Zelda was the youngest daughter of a judge in Montgomery, Alabama. Fitzgerald courted Zelda, but she broke her

engagement because of Fitzgerald's lack of funds. As Matthew J. Bruccoli points out in *A Brief Life of Fitzgerald*, writing his first successful novel, [This Side of Paradise](#) (originally called the *Romantic Egoist*), was part of Fitzgerald's own quest to obtain Zelda's hand in marriage. The fictional Gatsby was less successful with Daisy, though it is difficult to conclude that the real life union was much of an improvement with Fitzgerald practically drinking himself to death and Zelda languishing in a variety of mental hospitals.

In assessing Fitzgerald's three principal female characters, the reader must keep in mind that all appraisals are filtered through the eyes of Nick Carraway. Thus, the question of whether he is a reliable narrator assumes paramount importance. Nick of course, boldly asserts, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known." (59; ch.3)

But Nick seems to embody a double standard in his judgments of the behavior of men and women as feminist critic, Judith Fetterley, demonstrates in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Nick castigates Jordan for relatively minor dishonesties but accepts with equanimity the massive dishonesty that has characterized Gatsby's entire life. Fetterley concludes that the female characters in *The Great Gatsby* function as symbols—not persons.

If *Gatsby* is a love story, it is one centered in hostility toward women. Gatsby thinks of Daisy in relation to the objects with which she is surrounded. Her value for him is increased by the fact that she has been desired by so many men. Indeed, Tom's gift of a string of pearls valued at \$350, 000 the night before the two are to be wed only increases his estimation of her worth. One might ask if indeed there is an actual emotional relation between Gatsby and Daisy, or if Daisy has become for Gatsby simply an "unutterable vision."

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Fitzgerald's Use of the Color Green

It is arguable that Jay Gatsby values two things above all others—love (particularly his love for Daisy Buchanan) and money (the means by which he hopes to win Daisy's heart). The two motivations converge in Fitzgerald's use of the color green, a symbol that represents both love and money as well as Gatsby's ultimate goal—a spring-like renewal that would put his past behind him and plant the seeds for a future with Daisy. Fitzgerald shows green in its many incarnations, from the promise of a new bud to the decay of a stagnant pond, as Gatsby's dream progresses from a dim light in the distance to the reality of lovely illusions left in ruins.

Our first glimpse of green in the novel comes in the first chapter, as Nick stumbles upon Gatsby with his arms outstretched toward "a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock" (21). The light marks the end of the Buchanons' pier, and the beginning of Gatsby's green hope. He stands, stares and reaches out to the light as if reaching out to Daisy herself. At this point, even with all the money and power at his disposal, he can't directly address the object of his affection; the light represents what could have been and what could be.

By chapter 4, green takes the recognizable form of money, or at least the things money can buy. As described by Nick, the car is cream-colored and bright. The upholstery, however, the car's center and the point at which it connects with the people inside, is a deep green, "a sort of green leather conservatory" (64). What better than a "green leather conservatory" for watching stars, particularly the bright green star across the bay? Even Gatsby's car is a reminder of Daisy, and of her place in his universe. He buys the car to impress her if he can, and the green leather interior is a nod to decadent consumption as well as a symbol of the evolution Gatsby must undergo to make his dream a reality.

The color green's connection to nature, growth and renewal first appears in chapter 5 as Nick prepares for Gatsby and Daisy's rendezvous at his house. Gatsby not only sends flowers to impress Daisy, he has a "greenhouse" shipped in (84). The word "greenhouse" suggests incubation, like the love Gatsby has let incubate as he built his fortune. Having convinced Daisy to meet with him, Gatsby wants her surrounded with fresh greenery to symbolize the renewed love he hopes their interlude will inspire.

A few pages later, as Gatsby dazzles Daisy with his freshly laundered seasonal shirts, Fitzgerald slips in an apple-green one. This lighter green foreshadows a crucial light green later in the novel, and alludes to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Perhaps Fitzgerald wants us to see Daisy as an Eve figure, tempting Gatsby back in Louisville to bite the apple that led to his criminal activities, opening him up to decadence and deceit in the name of love. Also, the green of money (the expensive shirts), the green of renewal (the apple), and the green promise at the end of Daisy's pier coincide in this brief but important scene. (92)

Immediately following the apple reference, Gatsby tells Daisy that he has been watching the light at the end of the dock. He has Daisy in his hands, literally, and he reconsiders his attachment to the light. From here the color green begins to take on a different cast as Fitzgerald shows us the underside of love, money and renewal. Compared to the physical presence of Daisy,

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever.... It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (93)

Green is no longer an enchanted color for Gatsby, and Fitzgerald's references change accordingly. "Now it was again a green light on a dock" today might read, "Now it was nothing more than a green light on a dock." Reality shows itself, and for that moment, the reality is what Gatsby has been seeking since his own transformation years earlier.

A flashback shows James Gatz in "a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants" (98; ch. 6), just prior to beginning his life as Jay Gatsby. The jersey is significant both because it symbolizes the green renewal Gatz experiences and because it is torn; Gatsby will pay dearly for the rebirth and wealth he seeks. From the moment his transformation takes place, the die is cast for Gatsby's fall. Fitzgerald allows his green references to wither as well, parallel to Gatsby's own slow demise. The cynicism typical of the Jazz Age also intrudes; the idealism that led Gatsby to remake himself for such a simple dream can't be allowed in a world with no place for idealism, where green means only money, and the more, the better.

Tom accompanies Daisy to one of Gatsby's parties in chapter 6. Daisy's attitude has already changed; she tells Nick she is passing out green cards for kisses. Why are the cards green? Perhaps to celebrate her own small renewal—the beginning of a new relationship with Jay Gatsby and his fortune. Green cards suggest green paper—dollars, perhaps—and Fitzgerald seems to be saying that Daisy may be willing to trade her love for money. In the end, after all, she chooses the stability of Tom's "old money" to Gatsby's "new money," in a sense preferring the security of a more comfortable faded green than the possibility of a brighter, more ambitious green.

The birth of love and the death of love can both be represented by the color green, and Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting that they are intertwined as he moves toward the end of the novel. In a brief reference in chapter 7, George Wilson, suffering from both the heat and from suspicion of his wife's infidelity, gasses up Tom's car. Fitzgerald tells us, "In the sunlight his face was green" (123). Wilson is literally sickened by his situation, and the destruction of his marriage cascades into the novel's other relationships. By the end of the book, everyone's face is figuratively as green as George's.

George's wife Myrtle is killed later in chapter 7, and the first thing Michaelis, the Wilsons' neighbor, tells the police is that the "death car" is light green. Later reports suggest a blue or yellow car. Just as yellow and blue make green, Myrtle's blood mingles with the dust in the Valley of Ashes (137).

Fitzgerald breaks green down into its component colors cleverly, possibly suggesting that the other couplings in the novel are as tainted as Myrtle's blood in the road. This blurring takes the pinpoint of green light in chapter 1 and stretches it into a world that has no place for it, one in which the purity suggested by the light must coexist with darker forces. By Fitzgerald's reckoning, there is no purity in the world of the Jazz Age; the green light is a symbol not only of the past, but of a past that may never have existed, both in Gatsby's life and in American life in general.

By the novel's final chapter, both Myrtle and Gatsby are dead, the Buchanons and Jordan have disappeared, and Nick prepares to leave as well. Before leaving, he returns to "that huge incoherent failure of a house once more" (179). He considers the place and its once-proud heritage: "I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world" (180).

Green has become a sad color for Nick and for Fitzgerald; long before Gatsby, the verdant land of Long Island represented something new and fresh, a true renewal. Once the desire for other "green," particularly money, came into the mix, Fitzgerald suggests the possibility for purity and rebirth, and finally love, prove unattainable.

In the last paragraph of the novel, as in chapter 1, the green light appears, bringing the symbolism full circle. Nick says Gatsby "believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (180). With the events of the novel behind him, Nick reiterates the fact that the light Gatsby counted on and followed was, as Gatsby saw in chapter 5, no more than a green light. Gatsby invests a great deal of hope and love in the color green throughout the novel; at the end green is simply green, as magical and powerful as Gatsby's apple-green shirts, which can't hold Daisy's interest long enough to make her stay.

Fitzgerald's use of the color green in *The Great Gatsby* reflects the arc of Gatsby's dream—in the beginning it is fresh, bursting with desire and imagination as if his dream were a newly blossoming flower. As reality sets in—the irritants of attitude and deceit and the collision of damaged lives—the green fades, or it weathers like a sick face. Finally, the same bright green of the past becomes no more than a memory, and not necessarily a clear one.

Gatsby's green hope rests on the light at the end of Daisy's dock more than the reality of Daisy, past or present. She proves herself to be not the fulfillment of his dream, but as elusive and uncertain as the flickering green glow barely visible across an expanse of water. Gatsby dies pursuing that light, blinding himself to the other colors that exist all around him.

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The American Dream

The ideal of the American Dream is based on the fantasy that an individual can achieve success regardless of family history, race, or religion simply by working hard enough. Frequently, "success" is equated with the fortune that the independent, self-reliant individual can win. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald examines and critiques Jay Gatsby's particular vision of the 1920s American Dream. Though Fitzgerald himself is associated with the excesses of the "Roaring Twenties," he is also an astute social critic whose novel does more to detail society's failure to fulfill its potential than it does to glamorize the "Jazz Age."

As a self-proclaimed “tale of the West,” the novel explores questions about America and the varieties of the American Dream. In this respect, *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps that legendary opus, the “Great American Novel”—following in the footsteps of Herman Melville’s [Moby Dick](#) and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. As a novel that has much to say about faith, belief, and illusion, it merits being considered alongside works like T. S. Eliot’s [The Waste Land](#), which explores the “hollowness” lying below the surface of modern life. It is possible to regard Gatsby as an archetypal tragic figure, the epitome of idealism and innocence who strives for order, purpose and meaning in a chaotic world. Fitzgerald introduces the theme of underlying chaos early in the novel when the violent Tom Buchanan declares, ““Civilization’s going to pieces”” (12; ch. 1).

Although Fitzgerald is sketchy about the details of Gatsby’s meteoric rise, the reader does know that he was a poor boy from the midwest without inherited wealth or family connections who succeeded in obtaining an elaborate house in West Egg from where he stages lavish, catered parties for people he doesn’t know. With wealth comes the opportunity to reinvent his identity, inspired primarily by a “single green light, minute and far away” (21; ch. 1): this is the house of Daisy Fay Buchanan, the very wealthy, former Louisville belle whom Gatsby had loved before the war but who marries the immensely wealthy Tom Buchanan of Chicago.

All that matters for Gatsby is the future: achieving his goal of reclaiming Daisy. That is part of the power of the American Dream—the irrelevance of the past. A fabricated history is just as useful as a truthful history. So Gatsby constructs grandiose lies that he doesn’t even bother to cloak in a shred of reality. For instance, when he decides to convince Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator, that he isn’t a “nobody,” Gatsby casually mentions that he’s the ““son of some wealthy people in the Middle West ... but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years”” (65; ch. 4).

When Nick, who is indeed from the Middle West, inquires ““What part?”” Gatsby is reduced to the geographically hysterical lie: ““San Francisco.”” Later in the novel, the reader learns that far from being educated at Oxford as part of a family tradition, Gatsby’s brief stint there was part of a program for American soldiers following World War I. As Nick observes, Gatsby gives new meaning to the phrase “the self-made man”: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (98; ch. 6).

The idealism evident in Gatsby’s constant aspirations helps define what Fitzgerald saw as the basis for the American Character. Certainly Gatsby is a firm believer in the American Dream of self-made success: he has not only self-promoted an entire new persona for himself, but he has also succeeded both financially and , at least ostensibly, socially. Yet the Dream which offers Gatsby the chance to “suck on the pap of life” (110; ch. 6) forces him to climb to a solitary place, isolated and alienated from the rest of society. In the midst of the drunken revelers at his party, Gatsby is “standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes” (50; ch. 3) At the end of the novel, Gatsby will also be practically alone at his own funeral.

Gatsby’s primary ideological shortcoming is that he makes Daisy Buchanan the sole focus of his belief in the orgastic future. His previously varied aspirations (evidenced by the book Gatsby’s father shows Nick detailing his son’s resolutions to improved himself) are sacrificed to Gatsby’s single-minded obsession with Daisy. Even Gatsby realized when he first kissed Daisy that once he “forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (110; ch. 6). Finally five years later, Gatsby reunites with Daisy, takes her on a tour of his ostentatious mansion, and pathetically displays his collection of British-made shirts. Significantly, that much longed-for afternoon produces not bliss but disappointment.

As Nick observes:

As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. (95; ch. 5)

As the novel unfolds, Gatsby seems to realize that—as he did with his own persona—he has created an ideal for Daisy to live up to. He remains firmly committed to her, even after her careless driving has caused Myrtle Wilson's death. Only his own needless death at the hands of the distraught Mr. Wilson (led by Tom Buchanan to believe that Gatsby has killed Myrtle) ends Gatsby's obsession with Daisy.

What Fitzgerald seems to be criticizing in *The Great Gatsby* is not the American Dream itself but the corruption of the American Dream. What was once for leaders like [Thomas Jefferson](#) a belief in self-reliance and hard work has become what Nick Carraway calls “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (98; ch. 6). The energy that might have gone into the pursuit of noble goals has been channeled into the pursuit of power and pleasure, and a very showy, but ultimately empty, form of success.

Gatsby's dream can be identified with America herself with its emphasis on the inherent goodness within people, youth, vitality, and a magnanimous openness to life itself. With the destruction of Gatsby, we witness a possible destiny of America herself. Critic Matthew J. Bruccoli, writing in *Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, quotes a letter written by Fitzgerald while composing *Gatsby*: “That's the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory.”

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Romance and Cynicism in The Great Gatsby

On one level, *The Great Gatsby* is a romantic novel, or at least romance-driven. The central story of Jay Gatsby's undying hope for the love for Daisy Buchanan, offers a romantic ideal, and the couple's brief affair almost reads like a fairytale romance.

The secondary relationship between Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker takes on a “Boy Meets Girl” quality—Nick is fascinated by Jordan, and he certainly catches her attention. On the surface, Gatsby and Nick seek a perfect love; in Fitzgerald's Jazz Age world, both men's desires are hopelessly bound up in the cynicism fostered by the rapid changes taking place in American society. As such, both men's romances are doomed to fail in the face of cynicism.

From the moment he meets a young Daisy Fay, Jay Gatsby is in love. The only glimpse the author gives us of the couple's interaction is through the voice of Jordan Baker, who sees Daisy and Gatsby sitting together in Daisy's car: “The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since” (75; ch. 4)

We get no details of the romance between the two, but there must have been quite a romance; Jordan relates Daisy's insistence on going to New York to “say good-by to a soldier” (75; ch. 4), alienating her family and leaving her trapped at home. Also, Jordan helps a very drunk Daisy sober up before her wedding after a letter (presumably from Gatsby) causes her to “‘change’ her mine” (76; ch. 4).

Flash-forward to the green light on Daisy's dock; even five years of distance and a soggy, unanswered letter haven't cooled Gatsby's love for Daisy, or his desire to be worthy of her love. But as genuine as Gatsby's desire may be, he takes shortcuts to get to the top and earn Daisy's attention. Fitzgerald layers his main character's supposedly pure love with cynicism toward the world and toward his own potential. This cynicism threatens to taint Gatsby's love even as he fights to acquire his lovely prize.

Gatsby becomes a criminal and concocts an elaborate cover, hiding in plain sight at his regular, lavish parties. The parties also provide an elaborate lure for Daisy, who now lives just across the Sound. Gatsby has no faith in his ability to win Daisy on the strength of their younger love; the cynicism of the 1920s has set in, and he can't trust Daisy's motivations or his own.

Even after Nick arranges a secret meeting for the two at his house, Gatsby is furtive and terrified. It's difficult, perhaps, to believe that a love based on a false identity can survive, much less be rekindled. He is frightened, uncertain, embarrassed, and cynical about the possible outcome of his trust. Only when Nick criticizes him for "“acting like a little boy”" (88; ch. 5) does Gatsby decide to act on his true feelings.

Gatsby's gamble seems to pay off—although we are again not privy to the conversation between himself and Daisy, its conclusion is obvious. Gatsby "literally glowed" (89, ch. 5), as if believing his romantic intentions toward Daisy could defeat the cynicism all around them, not to mention her marriage and his criminal past.

Nick and Jordan's romance begins as casually as Gatsby and Daisy's must have back in 1917. When they first meet, Nick "enjoyed looking at her" (11; ch. 1), then describes her as a potential lover would. Daisy encourages them twice—the first time she tells them "“it's very romantic outdoors”" (15; ch. 1), as if motioning for them to enjoy the romantic night. The second time (the same evening at the Buchanons' house) Daisy seems to be pushing the romance of the outdoors on them:

“In fact, I think I'll arrange a marriage. Come over often, Nick, and I'll sort of—oh—fling you together.... Her family is one aunt about a thousand years old. Besides, Nick's going to look after her, aren't you, Nick?” (18; ch. 1)

This playful exchange comes after what may be the most honest thing Daisy says the entire evening: "“I've had a very bad time, Nick, and I'm pretty cynical about everything”" (16; ch. 1).

Daisy puts the constant tension between romantic ideal and cynical reality into words without even realizing it; then again, her worldview places the two on an equal footing. Fitzgerald seems to suggest that Daisy's attitude is a common one in both East and West Egg. As such, neither can truly exist without the influence of the other, inevitably leading to disaster.

Romance surfaces again, as, even after an argument over Jordan's reckless driving, she reveals what she knows about Gatsby. Nick is attracted to Jordan, but his attraction may be because of what she represents to him—a Midwesterner who has internalized the cynical nature of the scene:

Suddenly I wasn't thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired." (79; ch. 4)

They kiss amidst Fitzgerald's skillful trick of making cynicism romantic, acceptable, even sexy.

Nick's initial attraction shifts from the possibility of romance in the traditional sense to the cynic's resignation to a "good match." Like every character in the novel except Gatsby, Nick seems incapable of the

emotional depth required for true romantic love; to compensate, he accepts the first substitute that presents itself.

In chapter 7, Fitzgerald illustrates the inevitable consequence of the marriage between the romantic and the cynical. The Plaza Hotel suite unravels any romance the group might have hoped for. Tom and Gatsby argue over Daisy as if she were a polo pony rather than the object of romantic desire:

“She never loved you, do you hear?” [Gatsby] cried. “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!” (130)

Gatsby appeals to Daisy’s romantic side, the girl from Louisville with dreams of a perfect life; Tom appeals to her sense of reality, the cynical reality that would enable Daisy to live in the manner to which she had become accustomed. Daisy succumbs to the lure of reality; her heart, after all, is far less important than security in a world that values security and success above all else.

The same day, Nick turns 30, but he can only see his relationship with Jordan in terms of earlier events: “There was Jordan beside me, who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age” (135; ch. 7).

Now Nick, so naïve and full of romantic hope in the beginning of the novel, equates Jordan’s cynicism and skepticism with wisdom. Dreams like Gatsby’s longtime dream for love are part of the “well-forgotten” past of a world in which dreams have little or no value. Cynicism in Gatsby’s world is a mix of practicality, skepticism and distrust that governs everyone’s actions in their pursuit of success to the exclusion of any other motivation.

Nick’s desire for Jordan cools, and after Myrtle’s death he avoids her along with the rest of the group. Finally they talk, and Jordan reveals that she is engaged. Unemotional about the announcement, Nick isn’t sure that he believes her, but he acknowledges he is “half in love with her” (177; ch. 9) as he leaves her. To save face, Jordan claims that she was wrong about Nick’s honesty. Nick responds, “‘I’m thirty.... I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor’” (177; ch. 9).

Jordan’s cynicism is thus validated—she believed Nick was too good to be true, and that turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nick’s response is at once an acknowledgement of his failure to escape the cynicism of his surroundings and an expression of his desire to return to the more naïve, romantic world of the Midwest.

Fitzgerald presents romanticism and cynicism in the Jazz Age as two sides of the same coin, and as two forces that can never be reconciled. The Buchanons and Jordan never seemed to have had dreams beyond attaining success and status; Gatsby’s dreams prove to be his undoing; and Nick’s dream of success in New York dissolves into a cynical mess he can only escape by leaving.

Through these lives, Fitzgerald seems to be telling us that romantic ideals are impossible in early 20th-Century America, that they are a relic of a bygone era. He also appears to mourn that era, throwing all his characters into a world where no one can trust anyone else and no good deed goes unpunished.

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A Modernist Masterwork

The Great Gatsby, the first truly Modernist novel to find success in the United States, set the tone for the movement that defined American literature well into the present day. In [Modernism](#) Fitzgerald found a way to define his world that would have been impossible in the nineteenth-century Victorian style that still dominated American writing. In his style, portrayal of American morality and treatment of his characters, Fitzgerald left the Victorian era behind, creating a Modernist masterwork that still serves as a model for American fiction.

The gritty realism of William James and his contemporaries, and even the light-hearted tone of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, was too limited to allow Fitzgerald to portray the Jazz Age, a period in which dark fantasy reigned. Modernism offered a broader palette, a self-consciously surreal landscape in which life is viewed more metaphorically than meticulously detailed. Only through this lens could a central theme of the novel emerge:

Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. (4-5; ch. 1)

The eggs are more a product of Nick's imagination than a realistic geographical description; by mixing in metaphor, Fitzgerald not only described the setting of his novel, but alludes to the area as a breeding ground for the events to come without revealing what will "hatch."

The darker side of New York, which Victorian writers would render as dirty and ugly as Dickensian London, becomes softer and more vague in Fitzgerald's description:

A fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (23; ch. 2)

The image, although of the underbelly of society, is still oddly beautiful. Fitzgerald creates a fantasy world in which anything is possible, an approach later used by writers ranging from Hemingway and [Joseph Conrad](#) to John Barth and Raymond Carver. By removing his narrative from pure reality, Fitzgerald is able to take a more impressionistic approach to New York, effectively making the Eggs and the Valley of Ashes characters in their own right.

In such an unreal setting, the old rules no longer apply; some can be bent, others broken. The nineteenth-century's insistence on accountability and adherence to moral guidelines in its fiction had begun eroding before *Gatsby* was written—Fitzgerald completed the process with his portrayal of a world that is less immoral than amoral—less rebelling against moral codes than having no concept of them.

Change was, after all, in the air. Jay Gatsby dies, not as a result of his criminal activities, but from being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Myrtle Wilson dies, not from a jealous wife's rage over her adultery, but from that wife's drunken incompetence. Tom and Daisy, responsibly for both deaths, simply leave the Eggs—Nick's later meeting with Tom suggests they have no remorse. Jordan drifts away, never revealed as a cheater on the pro tour. Only Nick seems to have retained a conscience from their shared Midwestern heritage, but it is tempered by his exposure to Gatsby's world:

One night I did hear a material car [at Gatsby's house], and saw its lights stop at his front steps. But I didn't investigate. Probably it was some final guest who had been away at the

ends of the earth and didn't know that the party was over. (179; ch. 9))

Nick will carry what he has seen at the parties, culminating in the fateful “party” at the Plaza Hotel, with him forever.

Gatsby's parties themselves set the stage for the amoral activities to follow. Again, the definition is important—nothing immoral seems to go on at the parties in detail. What Fitzgerald gives us is a glamorous sheen of decadence. Note the lack of specific detail in Nick's account of the aftermath of one party:

Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands.... One of the men was talking with curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife, after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way, broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks—at intervals she appeared suddenly at his side like an angry diamond, and hissed: “You promised!” into his ear. (51, ch. 3)

All we see of the husband is his “curious intensity,” with no description of what physical form that intensity might take; all we see of the wife is her “angry diamond” attack style, another metaphor for wealth, but no obvious description of drunkenness or any other condition that might have escalated her anger. We see nothing of the actress's response to any of this. Is she flattered? Sexually interested? Plotting a way to take advantage of any money the man might have? Fitzgerald doesn't tell us. The scene is portrayed as if it is a normal course of events for the sad, insecure, amoral crowd that parties at Jay Gatsby's house.

Of course, the party guests are merely sketches compared to the full-blown main characters of the novel—or would “caricatures” be a more appropriate term? Using characters as symbols of human behavior is as old as literature itself, but nineteenth-century American writers tended toward more individual character studies and deeper character development. “Minimalizing” a step further than [Mark Twain](#) Fitzgerald brings a European allegorical feel to his Gatsby characters, prompting later Modernists from [William Faulkner](#) to [Philip Roth](#) to do the same.

Fitzgerald's cross-fertilization of traditionally American and traditionally English elements, specifically in characterization, allows him to distill his characters to their core qualities—Nick the innocent, Gatsby the ambitious, Daisy the beautiful fool, Tom the ruthless capitalist, Jordan the unscrupulous socialite—and to make locations like the Eggs, the Valley of Ashes, even the Eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg into characters in their own right.

Those who criticize Wolfsheim and Gatsby's father as under-developed characters miss the point; both are merely aspects of Gatsby he leaves behind when he dies. Neither criminal ambition (Wolfsheim) nor pure love (Mr. Gatsby) can die; as a combination of these qualities, all this is lost of Gatsby is the body in which Fitzgerald placed him. This is fitting, considering that Fitzgerald uses his characters to criticize elements of his society that are also deathless.

Open social criticism is another Modernist hallmark Fitzgerald exploits to its fullest in his characters. In the nineteenth century, essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau advocated Civil Disobedience from jail; Fitzgerald's response is a near-parody of 1920s American urban life. His world is close enough to the real world to be recognizable, yet it is blurred enough to serve his purposes. All of *Gatsby's* characters, human and nonhuman, participate in Modernism's open examination of such American institutions as industry, power and class and their by-products. *Gatsby's* open critique, already in use by poets of the time, is the most blatant yet, beginning an almost century-long tradition of social commentary in American literature.

The Great Gatsby set the tone for literature to come in its blending of various post-nineteenth century ideas into what would become known as Modernism and its offshoot, Postmodernism. Fitzgerald, influenced by the

social and artistic changes going on all around him, developed a vision that has persisted into fiction of the twenty-first century; his concerns are our concerns, and American life has changed little from Modern to Postmodern. Only the terms have changed. In defining what fiction could become, *Gatsby* is as important today as in 1926 as an example of what Modernist literature can, and still does, accomplish.

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Fitzgerald's Distinctly American Style of Writing

One of the simplest yet most profound reasons *The Great Gatsby* is considered an American classic is its use of language, more particularly the emerging “American Idiom.” Writers of the 20s and beyond sought to find a way of using English that was more than simply a rehash of the great British writers, a style of writing that was distinctly American. Fitzgerald not only tapped into the “American Idiom,” influencing writers to come, but elevated the language above street slang and regional distinctions into a truly artistic form that reflects the high and low of American society. The beginning and ending passages of the novel clearly illustrate the way Fitzgerald creates a uniquely American expression from the basic building blocks of the English language.

The beginning of the novel sets the bar immediately, as Fitzgerald speaks with Nick’s voice, a “typical Midwesterner” with, one would assume, a typically Midwestern accent:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. (1-2)

One of the first features that stands out in this passage is Nick’s almost conversational tone. Fitzgerald freely uses contractions and independent clauses separated by commas and articles like “and so” and “because.” Here, the sentences retain much of the length common in the British novel, but what may be the most resonant sentence in the first chapter—“Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope”—is remarkably short in comparison. The short sentences that characterize the work of Hemingway and generations to follow weave into *Gatsby*, usually to set off particular ideas as important ones.

Fitzgerald’s figurative language in the opening passage is similarly reserved, but equally telling. Nick is faced with “veteran bores,” and “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” and he is aware of “intimate revelation[s] quivering on the horizon.” And of course, one of the central themes of the novel revolves around the idea of “infinite hope.” The notion of “reserving judgment” is skewered as well in

Nick's comparison between "normal" and "abnormal" minds; in fact, the entire section devoted to reserving judgment passes judgment on "wild, unknown men" by describing them in figurative terms.

Fitzgerald opens the novel strongly, asserting Nick's unique voice through his informality and hints that he is hardly as fair-minded as he would like to be. Through language alone, Fitzgerald is able to establish Nick as an unreliable narrator. In essence, Nick betrays himself before the novel even begins.

As one might expect, the ending passage of *The Great Gatsby* builds on the language—voice, tone, figurative devices—used throughout the novel. It also expands on them as the story expands beyond the confines of Long Island. Just before Nick boards the train to return to the Midwest, he visits the beach at Gatsby's house one last time:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

In this long passage, Fitzgerald develops a much broader metaphor, one that is perhaps appropriate to the major characters of *The Great Gatsby* and their experiences. The Midwestern transplants themselves are "Dutch sailors" of a sort, and their experience of New York was undoubtedly as magical when they first arrived. Their wonder, coupled with a focus on the "inessential houses ... melt[ing] away," provide an excellent, sly recap of the novel's themes—the Dutch sailors' wonder is substituted for Gatsby's wonder at the green light on Daisy's dock, and (in a nice bit of juxtaposition) Gatsby's dream is as dead and long-past as the trees that the sailors enjoyed, and which were cut down to build Gatsby's house. In a sense, Gatsby was the architect of his own demise, as are we all. Fitzgerald expertly builds comparison upon comparison to make this point.

As in the opening of the novel, this passage makes extensive use of independent clauses connected by commas and articles, but additional punctuation—dashes and ellipses—added to the mix. Like [Emily Dickinson](#) in [Poetry](#) Fitzgerald allows his punctuation to make the piece "breathe." The result is the illusion of shorter, more distinctive sentences, which inevitably leads to others' use of the shortest sentences possible. Fitzgerald opens a door for writers to experiment with sentence length, and with the possibilities of different rhythms that could in retrospect be called American.

The language in the conclusion is actually elevated beyond that used in the introduction. The passage itself is longer and more dramatic, the scene is wispy and almost unreal, and Fitzgerald's language choices allow a shift from a more conversational tone to a more refined, almost poetic expression. The conversational tone had been used in the writings of Mark Twain; in using it, Fitzgerald was merely adopting popular nineteenth century American style. However, by elevating the language at the end, by appealing to something more, he leaves us hanging on his last words. Indeed, the last sentence—in fact one long sentence “chopped up” by punctuation as described above—is one of the best-known sentences in American literature.

Fitzgerald used *The Great Gatsby* as a vehicle for his ideas on social change and corruption; along the way he changed the way Americans write novels. By using genuine American language, he was able to truly show American life and its concerns even in a story that could best be described as a sort of twentieth-century allegory. Fitzgerald's experiments in the music of American language worked, and his literary descendants continue to explore the linguistic ground he laid at the beginning of the century.

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The Jazz Age

The Great Gatsby's most obvious reference to “The Jazz Age” revolution taking place in American Arts in the 1920s occurs in the party scene in chapter 3:

“Ladies and gentlemen,” [the orchestra leader] cried. “At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff's latest work ... Vladimir Tostoff's *Jazz History of the World*.” (Fitzgerald 49)

Gatsby's request for a work that defies tradition, and certainly defeats the purpose of having a full symphony-sized orchestra on the grounds, is in fitting with his character. He himself has defied tradition, becoming a “self-made man” regardless of his methods; is it any wonder his choice of music would reflect both the “newness” of his money and the means by which he came to it?

The spirit of recreation and renewed vision echoes through the art of the period, particularly in its music. It makes sense that such music would provide a background for Gatsby's story. Like Jay Gatsby, composers and musicians of the 1920s charted new territory for themselves, changing the American musical landscape as drastically as Gatsby's transition from the starkness of North Dakota farmland to the glitz of a West Egg mansion.

Fitzgerald experienced a similar transition just spending time around the burgeoning New York Jazz Scene, according to Arnold Shaw: “Riding down Fifth Avenue one day in the 1920s [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) ‘bawled’ because, he later said, ‘I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again’” (Shaw 3). He and his wife Zelda were fixtures in Jazz Age social circles, and Fitzgerald was well-qualified to talk about not only the new music of the time but also the decadence that often accompanied it.

Prior to the 1920s, mainstream American music mostly consisted of folk tunes—nothing less tame than Scott Joplin's Ragtime piano pieces. The emphasis was on everyday people learning to play for themselves and their families and friends at home. By the twenties, the humble (and recent) tradition of the Mississippi Delta bluesmen had begun to filter through the “hot towns” of Chicago and Kansas City, producing a potent music not everyone could play. The relatively new phonograph and radio allowed previously regional music like the blues to be heard nationwide, creating the first Jazz Age stars. The bands of Bix Beiderbecke, Tom Brown, and Joe “King” Oliver introduced the hybrid music to young New York society, who immediately embraced

it. As the music grew more popular, jazzmen like Louis Armstrong and Jellyroll Morton became household names.

The big band, as it came to be known in the 1930s and 40s, also began during this period, under the direction of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Paul Whiteman, and others. The big band differed from its large ensemble predecessors by playing complex arrangements of familiar tunes, displaying the talents of not only the entire band but also of fiery soloists like Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter.

Had jazz stayed in bars and dance clubs, it may have disappeared as ragtime and the other styles of music that preceded it; thanks to Paul Whiteman's foresight, the music would endure through the efforts of a young composer named George Gershwin. Whiteman staged a show on February 12, 1924, that featured the premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with the composer himself on piano. Both the jazz and "serious music" camps sat up and took notice. By successfully merging traditional symphonic themes and instrumentation with the energy and familiar American quality of jazz, Gershwin had made jazz into a serious art form, and its influence spread even further (Shaw 47-53).

As Gershwin was merging the worlds of jazz and orchestral music (possibly the source for Fitzgerald's "Jazz History of the World"), musicians and writers in Harlem, New York, were emerging as important fixtures in American artistic life and history. Writers Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and their peers injected their work with the new strains of blues and jazz; [Langston Hughes](#) and Sterling Brown experimented with blues lyric forms in their poetry. Harlem was the place to be, and both black and white artists from all art forms were influenced by its energy, derived from a proximity to jazz.

Change was in the air, and the Broadway stage was not immune. Out of the decadence and protofeminism of the time (Think Jordan Baker from *Gatsby*) came the revues of Florenz Ziegfeld and his contemporaries. The revues were not story-driven, but contained a variety of entertainment forms—music, comedy, and particularly half- or mostly nude women, for which Ziegfeld became famous. Ziegfeld's Follies revived and "elevated" the earlier Vaudeville theatre and provided a showcase for legendary figures like composer Irving Berlin ("A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody," 1919), comedian Eddie Cantor, and singers like Fannie Brice (Shaw 232-35).

George White and John Murray Anderson's shows aspired to the level of sophistication Ziegfeld had mastered. White's *Scandals* ran successfully into the 1930s; Anderson is perhaps best known for employing Cole Porter before Porter became a star in his own right (Shaw 236-39).

Irving Berlin was a triple threat—he wrote both music and lyrics, and after breaking away from Flo Ziegfeld, he became a producer himself. His Music Boxes produced such hits as "Say It With Music," "Everybody Step," "What'll I do," and the ubiquitous "Yes, We Have No Bananas."

Richard Rodgers and Moss Hart, along with Berlin and Jerome Kern, carried the changes begun in their revues well beyond the decade. Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's [Show Boat](#), Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* all originated in the atmosphere created in the Jazz Age (Shaw 254-56).

Vincent Youmans' name might be absent from an accounting of the Jazz Age if not for his singular hit *No! No! Nanette* and its centerpiece "Tea for Two." *Nanette*, the only true "flapper" musical, best captures the spirit of the 1920s with its decadent nature, vibrant atmosphere, and changing roles for men and women. *Nanette* is still performed today, keeping a small part of the Jazz Age alive onstage.

Fitzgerald's exposure to the music of his time fuels not only *Gatsby*'s parties, but the general feel of the novel. Mayer Wolfsheim recalls the growl of Louis Armstrong and hard Chicago Jazz; *Gatsby* is a cross between a plaintive blues and an elaborate big band arrangement; Jordan is the embodiment of *Nanette* in the play of the same name, and Tom and Daisy conduct their lives as if they are part of an ongoing musical

theatre piece. Nick is the emcee, or even an old-style troubadour, commenting on the “acts” and observing their behavior as Fitzgerald did from his convertible. Like Fitzgerald, Nick becomes caught up in the music of the time and his rendering of it seems accurate but flawed.

The Great Gatsby works on a number of levels. On one level, it is a jukebox of 1920s hit songs and themes. In this sense, Fitzgerald’s commentary also preserves his music in the unmistakable flavorings of both story and style. On another level, the Jazz Age influences Fitzgerald’s storytelling to a point at which his objectivity is brought into question. This heavy influence is one of the novel’s saving graces; in its refusal to be totally “objective,” the novel shows the 1920s, and America, as it really is.

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The Theme of Time in The Great Gatsby

Time is one of the most pervasive themes in *The Great Gatsby*, weaving between characters and situations, slowing and speeding the action until the entire novel seems almost dreamlike. Fitzgerald not only manipulates time in the novel, he refers to time repeatedly to reinforce the idea that time is a driving force not only for the 1920s, a period of great change, but for America itself. We will see Fitzgerald also turns a critical eye to the American concept of time, in effect warning us all to avoid becoming trapped in time.

The Past

Fitzgerald strongly connects time in the novel with location, as if time were an entire setting in itself. Fitzgerald tips his hand early; after Nick provides a description of himself and what we assume are his motives in coming to New York, he makes an immediately important time reference: “Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening I drove over there to have dinner with the Tom Buchanans” (5; ch. 1)

Nick wants to relate the “history” of the summer, not its events, its characters, or “just” a story. This is to be a history, events frozen in time and examined and re-examined. Nick sets the stage for the novel’s treatment of time—despite the often frivolous characters and situations, this story bears more than a superficial reading. The Eggs gain enough historical importance to rival New York City itself. Fitzgerald shrinks his focus to a geographical area while simultaneously expanding its meaning in time.

The past plays a major role, perhaps the most major role, in the concept of time presented in *Gatsby*. Tom was a “Big Man on Campus” in the past, while Gatsby was both a poor farm boy and Daisy’s lover; Daisy was a flighty socialite with no family to tie her down; all of them were naïve Midwesterners whose lives, they now believe, were far better in a past they can’t help but romanticize. It is precisely this romanticizing of the past that enables Fitzgerald to write such a powerful novel—in allowing his characters to wallow around in their pasts, he reminds later generations of readers that neither the 20s nor his books should be romanticized. They should be taken for what they are, and made relative to the present day. The (possibly unintentional) consequence of this attitude is an audience that extends beyond the twentieth century.

Characters

Fitzgerald’s characters are not only obsessed with time, they seem to embody it. Tom Buchanan is obsessed with history, reading books like “*The Rise of the Colored Empires*” that offer historical explanations for his inability to rise above the life he lives. Tom is Old Money, hopelessly stuck in the past, trying to live up to his ancestors’ wealth by amassing his own. He can never recapture his youth, so he seeks to recreate the

excitement of those days by having a mistress on the side.

Daisy, too, is stuck in the past, a pre-feminist remnant of an age in which women were expected to act “a certain way.” She tolerates Tom’s affair, and stands out in stark contrast to Jordan Baker’s contemporary “flapper” persona. Daisy is as confined as Jordan is liberated, and she can’t live a life without a man to run it for her. Her true complication comes when two opposite aspects of her past—Tom and Gatsby—compete for her affection. In each, she sees qualities lacking in the other. For a woman who is defined by men, her own definition of herself comes into question.

Myrtle Wilson seems to have a fairly solid definition of herself, and she and her husband George are fully in the present. Living in the Valley of Ashes, they can’t help but see the world as it is, as it goes by the windows of their garage. Myrtle is usually willing to put up with the complications of seeing a married man in exchange for the material possessions George can’t give her. However, when she complains in her “secret” apartment in the city, the past literally smacks her in the face. Presumably, George would never do that to her, devoted as he is. That devotion, and the reality of his situation, causes George to snap at the end of the novel.

Gatsby, of course, the victim of George’s misplaced rage, represents the future. His past is colorless and best forgotten; James Gatz got to where he is in the beginning of the novel by focusing on the future and building toward it, by any means necessary. He desperately wants to make Daisy part of his future (He is, after all, building it to share with her, which hopelessly entangles his past with his future.), but she can’t commit to his far-reaching vision. Gatsby’s world falls apart when he realizes the future he envisions simply can’t happen.

Nick’s progression as a narrator provides a yardstick by which the other characters’ relationships to time can be measured. In the beginning, he is purely a product of his Midwestern past; by the time he acclimates himself to New York and meets Myrtle Wilson, he is very much in the present. At the end of the novel, Nick must reconcile his own future by returning to the site of his naïve past a wiser, more jaded person. Nick, in this sense, shares all the other characters’ perspectives of time, allowing us to watch time unfold.

Images

Fitzgerald uses a number of repeated images to represent time in *Gatsby*; one of the most telling is the clock in chapter 5. Gatsby and Daisy are meeting at Nick’s house for the first time, and the three are sharing an awkward conversation:

Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy, who was sitting, frightened but graceful, on the edge of a stiff chair.

“We’ve met before,” muttered Gatsby. His eyes glanced momentarily at me, and his lips parted with an abortive attempt at a laugh. Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers, and set it back in place. Then he sat down, rigidly, his elbow on the arm of the sofa and his chin in his hand.

“I’m sorry about the clock,” he said.

My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn’t muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head.

“It’s an old clock,” I told them idiotically.

I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor. (86-87)

The clock is a symbol of many things—Gatsby’s dream of having Daisy for himself, Daisy’s hope for a better life, Nick’s desire for the dramatic change that never comes, or even just their lives slowly ticking away. When Gatsby almost breaks it, the moment is shattered. None of the three characters will be the same again after the clock drops. Gatsby becomes uncharacteristically clumsy around Daisy, who has no idea what to say or do. Nick, too, is at a loss, coming up with something “idiotic” to say just to keep the conversation moving. The last line, though, foreshadows the ending of the novel: “I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor.” In this one moment, past, present and future all seem to meet and crash together in an impossible explosion of emotion and loss. From here, all is downhill.

In a very important sense, *The Great Gatsby* is all about time—its effects on people, its importance in our lives, and most particularly its status in the American consciousness. We see time in a linear fashion—broken up into discrete units for appointments, life plans, meetings and goals. Fitzgerald shows us lives all along that line, perhaps suggesting that the most successful American life is one that should see time in more flexible terms. As such, Nick may be seen as the only true successful character in the novel, as he is able to move across the various timelines, interact with the characters who inhabit them, and retain his sense of self in the end. Nick, as it turns out, is not a slave to time. Fitzgerald seems to be encouraging his readers to break their own chains and take the time to enjoy the lives they have while they have them.

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Jordan Baker, a Soldier in the Culture War

From a modern-day perspective, *The Great Gatsby*’s Jordan Baker seems a bit ordinary—a typical modern woman. To the novel’s original audience, however, Jordan’s behavior and attitude place her one step away from scandal. In 1926, many parts of the United States were relatively unaffected by the changes occurring in large urban centers like New York City; Fitzgerald’s main characters are displaced “Midwesterners” for precisely this reason. Publication of *The Great Gatsby* brought the changes in the air in the twenties to the rest of the nation, through their own eyes. Jordan represents one of the most extreme examples of these changes—the proto-feminist known as a flapper.

“Women’s Suffrage,” as early women’s movements were known, had been around since the nineteenth century. When the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was passed in 1920, activists moved into other arenas to fight for full recognition by American society. One of the arenas was the social arena. Flappers could hardly be called “activists,” as their activities and attitudes were more mainstream than politically radical. In changing fashion and the way a woman’s morality was perceived, flappers had more influence on society than their more radical sisters.

Birkbeck College of London feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has studied flappers as depicted in 1920s silent films. According to her, flappers were “shocking to the conventional and conformist” and “an integral part of the culture wars” of the decade. Characterized by short haircuts, short skirts, and feathers in their hair, flappers nevertheless “raised serious questions about women living independently, about sex and the right to be able to control your own body” (Mulvey). Jordan Baker is very similar to silent films’ “It Girl,” Clara Bow, and may have been based on her.

When Nick first meets Jordan, he knows she is different:

She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall.... I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in....

Miss Baker's lips fluttered, she nodded at me almost imperceptibly.... Again a sort of apology arose to my lips. Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me. (Fitzgerald 8-9)

Jordan is confident and intimidating; Nick has never met such a girl. He discovers she's a professional golfer, and they begin an odd, detached relationship that is heavily overshadowed by that between Gatsby and Daisy.

Their detachment (at least "on-screen"), and Jordan's independence, is truly realized when the couple parts in the novel's final chapter. Jordan informs Nick that she's engaged to another man, then ensures that he understands she is still very much in charge of the situation:

"Nevertheless you did throw me over," said Jordan suddenly. "You threw me over on the telephone. I don't give a damn about you now, but it was a new experience for me, and I felt a little dizzy for a while." (Fitzgerald 177)

We see very little detail of Nick and Jordan's relationship, save a passionate kiss at the end of chapter 4, but Fitzgerald seems to suggest that the two are more than casual friends. But, in stark contrast to Daisy, Jordan isn't interested in being a man's inferior. Her independence both attracts and intimidates Nick, an impossible conflict he is unwilling to resolve any other way than by leaving.

In creating Jordan Baker, Fitzgerald presents a "soldier" in the "culture war" of the 1920s. She and others like her began by influencing fashion and defying social norms against smoking, drinking and sex, then grew to influence women's attitudes and ideas nationwide. By exposing American women to the flapper in the person of Jordan Baker, Fitzgerald helped influence generations of women readers to aspire to more than Daisy Buchanan's quiet surrender.

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George and Myrtle Wilson

George and Myrtle Wilson are generally considered minor characters in *The Great Gatsby*, as they have less "screen time" than any of the major characters. However, both characters are pivotal to the events of the novel; without them, the major characters' interactions would read like a soap opera, and not a very interesting one. The Wilsons add an additional layer of substance by placing the major characters into perspective, by showing the lows to which both the upper and lower classes can sink.

Myrtle Wilson immediately distinguishes herself from both Daisy and Jordan, at least through Nick's eyes: "She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crêpe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering" (25; ch. 2).

If Daisy personifies upper-class delicacy and Jordan represents the detached, hedonistic flapper, Myrtle is the lower-class Earth Mother, soft and alluring—forbidden fruit for an elitist like Tom Buchanan. She offers Tom entry into a world he would otherwise be unable to enter, a world that is far more real than his own, and he offers her a fantasy in return, as evidenced by the apartment in New York.

It is Tom, though, who acts in a “lower class” fashion in the apartment, bloodying Myrtle’s nose for even mentioning Daisy’s name. He, in effect, switches classes because his carefully-constructed fantasy world is threatened by the intrusion of the real. Myrtle is a catalyst, influencing Tom’s actions even when she is absent because of her allure and her audacity, qualities that would be completely foreign to his wife.

Myrtle’s death is the climax of the novel, in the sense that her death triggers the events that lead to the novel’s conclusion with lives changed, ruined, and ended. Tom reacts by disavowing all knowledge of her existence and lying about the hit-and-run driver’s true identity, Daisy by deferring to her husband, and Jordan by simply disappearing. Nick reacts with horror, but it is a horror mingled with the detachment of a good man who has been jaded by his proximity to the other characters.

George Wilson reacts by committing the only intentionally cruel act depicted in the novel—he kills Gatsby, believing that Gatsby was not only the man driving the car that killed Myrtle, but Myrtle’s lover as well. Overcome with rage and grief, George turns the gun on himself. Nick’s narration of the final scene is telling—“It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson’s body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete” (162; ch. 8).

Nick uses the word “Holocaust” to describe George’s actions for a reason. He remembers the man who he had earlier described as “a blonde, spiritless man” (25; ch. 2); the man who, discovering Myrtle was having an affair, shouted, “‘You may fool me but you can’t fool God!’” (159; ch. 8); the man who literally hunted Gatsby down and shot him in cold blood by the swimming pool. The word “holocaust” can refer to a burned offering, a sacrifice; George sacrifices his spirit, his belief, and finally himself for his wife and their life together. It is no coincidence that a man who lives in the Valley of Ashes would bring so many burnt offerings into the lives of all concerned.

George Wilson’s emotion, like his wife’s, is genuine throughout the novel. Like Myrtle, George is simple and passionate, with a genuineness that comes from being a member of the lower classes. George can’t afford to “put on airs” as the other men in the novel do. Unlike Myrtle, George has no desire to join any other societal class; he simply wants to do the best he can in his own class. This is obviously not enough for Myrtle, whose constant browbeating and disappointment weigh on George heavily. His decision to hunt and kill Gatsby, mistaken or not, marks a significant change in his character as he forces himself into the “upper crust” mentality that allowed Daisy to run Myrtle down with her car without facing the consequences. After the murder, George is reminded of his place in society, and he has no choice but to take his own life.

Together, the Wilsons illustrate what the “major characters” in *The Great Gatsby* seek to avoid, but simultaneously aspire to. As vehicles for change in the story, they are as vital as the “major characters,” if not more so. By showing just how different the Eggs are from “ordinary folk,” Myrtle and George highlight the weaknesses not only in the upper classes but in all classes.

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Major Characters, Time, Ambiguity and Tragedy

Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* became an immediate classic and propelled its young author to a fame he never again equalled. The novel captured the spirit of the "Jazz Age," a post-[World War I](#) era in upper-class America that Fitzgerald himself gave this name to, and the flamboyance of the author and his wife Zelda as they moved about Europe with other American expatriate writers (such as Ernest Hemingway). However, *Gatsby* expresses more than the exuberance of the times. It depicts the restlessness of what [Gertrude Stein](#) (another expatriate modernist writer) called a "lost generation." Recalling T. S. Eliot's landmark poem "The Wasteland" (1922), then, *Gatsby* also has its own "valley of ashes" or wasteland where men move about obscurely in the dust, and this imagery of decay, death, and corruption pervades the novel and "infects" the story and its hero too. Because the novel is not just about one man, James Gatz or Jay Gatsby, but about aspects of the human condition of an era, and themes that transcend time altogether, it is the stuff of myth. Gatsby's attempts to attain an ideal of himself and then to put this ideal to the service of another ideal, romantic love, are attempts to rise above corruption in all its forms. It is this quality in him that Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, attempts to portray, and in so doing the novel, like its hero, attains a form of enduring greatness.

The novel is narrated in retrospect; Nick is writing the account two years after the events of the summer he describes, and this introduces a critical distance and perspective which is conveyed through occasional comments about the story he is telling and how it must appear to a reader. The time scheme of the novel is further complicated as "the history of that summer" of 1922 contains within it the story of another summer, five years before this one, when Gatsby and Daisy first courted. This is the story that Jordan tells Nick. As that earlier summer ended with Gatsby's departure for the war in the fall, so the summer of Nick's experience of the East ends with the crisis on the last hot day (the day of mint juleps in the hotel and Myrtle Wilson's death) and is followed by Gatsby's murder by George Wilson on the first day of fall. This seasonal calendar is more than just a parallel, however. It is a metaphor for the blooming and blasting of love and of hope, like the flowers so often mentioned. Similarly, the novel's elaborate use of light and dark imagery (light, darkness, sunshine, and shadow, and the in-between changes of twilight) symbolizes emotional states as well.

In-between time (like the popular song Klipspringer plays on Gatsby's piano: *In the meantime / In between time / Ain't we got fun?*) is described by Nick as the time of profound human change. While this can describe Daisy's change between her affair with Gatsby and the couples' reunion, it may also characterize the general sense of restlessness and profound changes happening in these first years after World War One. Daisy (the day's-eye, or the sun) is dressed in white and is associated with light and sunshine throughout the novel, and she is very much a seasonal creature. It is impossible, then, for Gatsby to catch this light and fix it in one place or one time. Daisy's constant quality is like the light in the novel, she is always changing. Gatsby's own devotion to her has a permanence that Daisy cannot live up to, yet Gatsby seems committed to an idea of Daisy that he has created rather than to the real woman she is. Daisy's changeability is not at fault in Gatsby's failure. Although she is careless in the way that people like Tom are careless in their wealth and treatment of other people, Daisy is naturally not able to renounce time itself in the way Gatsby does in order to meet him again in the past.

Gatsby is gorgeous and creates a sense of wonder in Nick for the daring nature of his impossible but incorruptible dream. It is the attempt itself and the firm belief that he can achieve the impossible that makes Gatsby more than the sum of his (somewhat shabby) reality. As a seventeen-year-old he transformed himself from plain James Gatz, to Jay Gatsby for whom anything is possible. As he rowed out to Dan Cody's sumptuous yacht off the shore of Lake Superior, he was crossing towards opportunity, and a Platonic conception of himself (based on the Greek philosopher Platos' theory of perfect forms, which interprets everything on earth as a better or worse copy of these forms, as well as the conception of a new self-identity). Gatsby conforms to an ideal of himself that transforms reality into possibility. This audacity and disregard for ties binding him to his own past is his apprenticeship for loving Daisy. In defiance of the class difference separating them, he aspires high to this girl in a golden tower, the "king's" daughter, whose voice is full of money. Gatsby does not seem to realize that his idea of Daisy, whom he weds with a kiss one summer night

has as little bearing on reality as Jay Gatsby does.

Gatsby is a romantic, but he is also made up of romantic stories by other people who speculate and rumor about his unknown past. Nick takes it upon himself to tell the story and thus to tell Gatsby's story as he pieced it together from different sources, and Nick characterizes himself as someone who understands Gatsby better, who wants to set the record straight, and who sides with Gatsby against the world that made him up and then deserted him. It is Nick alone who arranges Gatsby's funeral and meets with his father, and the bitterness of the lesson about humanity that Nick learns from this experience affects the way he tells the story. Certainly, Nick is also romanticizing Gatsby. He contrasts the wondrous hope which Gatsby embodied against the corruptness of his bootlegging business (Gatsby's fortune in fact came from illegal alcohol sales) and against the more corrupt society which preyed on Gatsby. Against the background of the times and of upper-class society like that represented at his parties, Gatsby's extraordinary gift for hope and his romantic readiness stand out as transcendent.

Nick's own role in the novel shares much of the nature of paradox and ambiguity which characterizes the whole. The novel is as much about Nick as it is about Gatsby and his colossal dream of Daisy. Nick is an involved outsider, privileged or burdened with the role of witness and recorder of events. While he protests often of his unwillingness to participate in other's embroilments and is frequently irritated or exasperated by them, he participates nevertheless. He is implicated in Tom's relationship with Myrtle by virtue of his presence with them (and the uncomfortable period he spends in the living room of the lovers' apartment while they are in the bedroom together implicates him further as a passive accomplice) while he retains his sense of distance through moral superiority. Similarly, Nick performs the service of go-between (or pander) for Gatsby and Daisy; the couple reunite in his house, and he invites Daisy there for this purpose. At Gatsby's party he acts as lookout, keeping a watchful eye for Tom while the couple slip over to sit on Nick's own porch. This ambivalence in his character undermines his statements about himself as being one of the few honest people that he has ever known, and has led to many critics considering him a kind of smug voyeur. However, Nick's own sense of being both enchanted and repelled by his experiences is at the source of the novel's larger depiction of a meretricious society both enchanting and repelling, and it is this quality which enables Nick to find Gatsby both the representative of everything for which he has an unaffected scorn, and at the same time the embodiment of gorgeous hope. In this way, a story often marked by sordid dealings and dismissed by Nick in one breath (writing two years later) as the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men can also be a holocaust or fully developed tragedy.

In considering the novel as tragedy, the role of fate (or fortune in its other sense) figures large. The novel is conspicuous in its lack of a religious belief system, God is absent from the skies over East and West Egg. Part of the restlessness of a postwar generation may describe the quest for a belief that can fill the void created by this loss, or the results of a hedonistic lifestyle that will distract people from it altogether. Nick clings to his declared preference for honesty and being a careful driver in a world of metaphorically careless drivers. Daisy is one who lives for the moment, and for whom glimpses of tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that are terrifying lapses of a willful blindness to such matters (and blindness is one of the novel's themes). Gatsby has his own willful blindness in the form of his enduring ideals and the dreams these ideals have created. In classical mythology, which the novel draws on heavily, the goddess Fortune is also blind in that she favors no one (she is often figured with one eye open and one eye closed, winking like Daisy herself) as she turns her wheel about, thereby deciding the fates of human beings. One question of the novel, then, is who (or what) is at the wheel? The blind eyes that watch over the world of the novel are those of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on an old billboard in the valley of ashes. After Myrtle's death, her husband George is looking at these when he says God sees everything. Nothing seems able to intervene in Gatsby's own inexorable fate, as Wilson tracks him down to murder him in the mistaken belief that Gatsby was driving the death car that killed Myrtle. This sense of predetermined destiny contributes to the novel as tragedy.

For all characters, the relationship between the past and the future is at issue, as well as personal responsibility for the choices they make in navigating the present between these. Nick appears to believe that being careful will keep him out of harm, but he is more of a careless driver than he realizes, as Jordan comments to him after Gatsby's death and after their affair is over. Gatsby himself recalls another careless driver. In Greek mythology Phaeton tried to harness his chariot to the sun and suffered for his presumption. Similarly, Gatsby tries with his yellow car (and all that it symbolizes) to catch Daisy, and fails just as surely. The many echoes of classical mythology recall to the novel a much more distant past (and a mythical kind of narrative) in order to make sense of the New World of America. The novel ends by uniting Gatsby's dream born from his past with the American dream from another past, a dream that is as incorruptible and unreal, indicating the way in which the future of this story may be found in the past: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Source: Casie E. Hermanson, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997. Hermanson is a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto.

The Greatness of Gatsby

[*The Great Gatsby's*] fundamental achievement is a triumph of language.

I do not speak merely of the "flowers," the famous passages: Nick's description of Gatsby yearning toward the green light on Daisy's dock, Gatsby's remark that the Buchanans' love is "only personal," the book's last page. Throughout, *The Great Gatsby* has the precision and splendor of a lyric poem, yet well-wrought prose is merely one of its triumphs. Fitzgerald's distinction in this novel is to have made language celebrate itself. Among other things, *The Great Gatsby* is about the power of art.

This celebration of literary art is inseparable from the novel's second great achievement—its management of point of view, the creation of Nick. With his persona, Fitzgerald obtained more than objectivity and concentration of effect. Nick describes more than the experience which he witnesses; he describes the act and consequences of telling about it. The persona is—as critics have been seeing—a character, but he is more than that: he is a character engaged in a significant action.

Nick is writing a book. He is recording Gatsby's experience; in the act of recording Gatsby's experience he discovers himself.

Though his prose has all along been creating for us Gatsby's "romantic readiness," almost until the very end Nick insists that he deplores Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality." This is not a reasoned judgment. Nick disapproves because he cannot yet affirm. He is a Jamesian spectator, a fastidious intelligence ill-suited to profound engagement of life. But writing does profoundly engage life. In writing about Gatsby, Nick alters his attitude toward his subject and ultimately toward his own life. As his book nears completion his identification with Gatsby grows. His final affirmation is his sympathetic understanding of Gatsby and the book which gives his sympathy form: both are a celebration of life; each is a gift of language. This refinement on James's use of the persona might be the cause of Eliot's assertion that *The Great Gatsby* represented the first advance which the American novel had made since James.

In Nick's opening words we find an uncompleted personality. There are contradictions and perplexities which (when we first read the passage) are easily ignored, because of the characteristic suavity of his prose. He begins the chronicle, whose purpose is an act of judgment and whose title is an evaluation, by declaring an inclination "to reserve all judgments." The words are scarcely digested when we find him judging:

The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality [tolerance] when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men.

The tone is unmistakable—a combination of moral censure, self-protectiveness, and final saving sympathy that marks Nick as an outsider who is nonetheless drawn to the life he is afraid to enter. So when he tells us a little later in the passage that "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope," we know that this and not the *noblesse oblige* he earlier advanced explains his fear of judging. Nick cannot help judging, but he fears a world in which he is constantly beset by objects worthy of rejection. He is "a little afraid of missing something"; that is why he hears the promise in Daisy's voice, half-heartedly entertains the idea of loving Jordan Baker, and becomes involved with the infinite hope of Jay Gatsby—"Gatsby, who represented everything for which [Nick had] an unaffected scorn."

When Nick begins the book he feels the same ambivalence toward Gatsby that characterizes his attitude toward life: a simultaneous enchantment and revulsion which places him "within and without." When he has finished, he has become united with Gatsby, and he judges Gatsby great. Finally he has something to admire; contemplating Gatsby redeems him from the "foul dust [which had] temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."

The economy with which Fitzgerald presents those sorrows and short-winded elations is another of the book's major achievements. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald contrived to develop a story by means of symbols while at the same time investing those symbols with vivid actuality. Everything in the book is symbolic, from Gatsby's ersatz mansion to the wild and aimless parties which he gives there, yet everything seems so "true to life" that some critics continue to see that novel primarily as a recreation of the 20's. *The Great Gatsby* is about the 20's only in the sense that [Moby Dick](#) is about whaling or that [The Scarlet Letter](#) is about Puritan Boston. Comparing the liveliness of Fitzgerald's book with Melville's or, better still, with Hawthorne's (which resembles its tight dramatic structure and concentration), you have a good indication of the peculiar distinction in Fitzgerald's work.

Of the novel's symbols, only the setting exists without regard to verisimilitude, purely to project meaning. *The Great Gatsby* has four locales: East Egg, home of the rich Buchanans and their ultra-traditional Georgian Colonial mansion; West Egg where the once-rich and the parvenus live and where Gatsby apes the splendor of the Old World; the wasteland of the average man; and New York, where Nick labors, ironically, at the "Probity Trust." East and West Egg are "crushed flat at the contact end"; they represent the collision of dream and dreamer which is dramatized when Gatsby tries to establish his "universe of ineffable gaudiness" through the crass materials of the real world. The wasteland is a valley of ashes in which George Wilson dispenses gasoline to the irresponsible drivers from East and West Egg, eventually yielding his wife to their casual lust and cowardly violence.

Fitzgerald's world represents iconographically a sterile, immoral society. Over this world brood the blind eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg: the sign for an oculist's business which was never opened, the symbol of a blindness which can never be corrected. Like other objects in the book to which value might be attached, the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg are a cheat. They are not a sign of God, as Wilson thinks, but only an advertisement—like the false promise of Daisy's moneyed voice, or the green light on her dock, which is invisible in the mist.

These monstrous eyes are the novel's major symbol. The book's chief characters are blind, and they behave blindly. Gatsby does not see Daisy's vicious emptiness, and Daisy, deluded, thinks she will reward her gold-hatted lover until he tries to force from her an affirmation she is too weak to make. Tom is blind to his hypocrisy, with "a short deft movement" he breaks Myrtle's nose for daring to mention the name of the wife she is helping him to deceive. Before her death, Myrtle mistakes Jordan for Daisy. Just as she had always mistaken Tom for salvation from the ash-heap, she blindly rushes for his car in her need to escape her lately

informed husband, and is struck down. Moreover, Daisy is driving the car; and the man with her is Gatsby, not Tom. The final act of blindness is specifically associated with Dr. Eckleburg's eyes. Wilson sees them as a sign of righteous judgment and righteously proceeds to work God's judgment on earth. He kills Gatsby, but Gatsby is the wrong man. In the whole novel, only Nick sees. And his vision comes slowly, in the act of writing the book.

The act of writing the book is, as I have said, an act of judgment. Nick wants to know why Gatsby "turned out all right in the end," despite all the phoniness and crime which fill his story, and why Gatsby was the only one who turned out all right. For, in writing about the others, Nick discovers the near ubiquity of folly and despair.

The novel's people are exemplary types of the debasement of life which is Fitzgerald's subject. Daisy, Tom, and Jordan lack the inner resources to enjoy what their wealth can give them. They show the peculiar folly of the American dream. At the pinnacle, life palls. Daisy is almost unreal. When Nick first sees her she seems to be floating in midair. Her famous protestation of grief ("I'm sophisticated God, I'm sophisticated") is accompanied by an "absolute smirk." Her extravagant love for Gatsby is a sham, less real than the unhappy but fleshly bond with Tom which finally turns them into "conspirators." Her beauty is a snare. Like Tom's physical prowess, it neither pleases her nor insures her pleasure in others. Tom forsakes Daisy for Myrtle and both for "stale ideas." Jordan's balancing act is a trick; like her sporting reputation, a precarious lie. They are all rich and beautiful—and unhappy.

Yearning toward them are Myrtle and Gatsby. Like Gatsby, Myrtle desires "the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves ... gleaming ... above the hot struggles of the poor." Unlike him, her "panting vitality" is wholly physical, merely pathetic; whereas Gatsby's quest is spiritual and tragic. Myrtle is maimed and victimized by Daisy's selfish fear of injury (Daisy could have crashed into another car but, at the last minute, loses heart and runs Myrtle down); Gatsby's death is but the final stage of disillusionment, and he suffers voluntarily.

Gatsby is, of course, one of the major achievements I have been noting. Although we see little of him and scarcely ever hear him speak, his presence is continually with us; and he exists, as characters in fiction seldom do, as a life force. He recalls the everlasting yea of Carlyle, as well as the metaphysical rebellion of Camus. His "heightened sensitivity to the promise of life" is but one half of his energy; the other being a passionate denial of life's limitations. Gatsby's devotion to Daisy is an implicit assault on the human condition. His passion would defy time and decay to make the glorious first moment of wonder, which is past, eternally present. His passion is supra-sexual, even super-personal. In his famous remark to Nick about Daisy's love for Tom, he is making two assertions: that the "things between Daisy and Tom [which Tom insists] he'll never know" are merely mundane and that the Daisy which he loves is not the Daisy which Tom had carried down from the Punch Bowl but the Daisy who "blossomed for him like a flower," incarnating his dream, the moment he kissed her. Gatsby's love for life is finally an indictment of the life he loves. Life does not reward such devotion, nor, for that reason, does it deserve it. Gatsby is great for having paid life the compliment of believing its promise.

When Hamlet dies amidst the carnage of his bloody quest for justice, he takes with him the promise that seeming will coincide with being and the hope that man can strike a blow for truth and save a remnant of the universe. When Ahab dies a victim to his own harpoon, he kills the promise that man may know his life and the hope that knowledge will absolve him. When Gatsby dies, more innocently than they (since, though a "criminal," he lacks utterly their taste for destruction), he kills a promise more poignant and perhaps more precious, certainly more inclusive than theirs: Gatsby kills the promise that desire can ever be gratified.

Source: Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby,'" in *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. VII, No. 4, Autumn, 1966, pp. 783-94.

A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is certainly more than an impression of the Jazz Age, more than a novel of manners. Serious critics have by no means settled upon what that "more" might be, but one hypothesis recurs quite regularly. It is the view that Fitzgerald was writing about the superannuation of traditional American belief, the obsolescence of accepted folklore. *The Great Gatsby* is about many things, but it is inescapably a general critique of the "American dream" and also of the "agrarian myth"—a powerful demonstration of their invalidity for Americans of Fitzgerald's generation and after.

The American dream consisted of the belief (sometimes thought of as a promise) that people of talent in this land of opportunity and plenty could reasonably aspire to material success if they adhered to a fairly well-defined set of behavioral rules—rules set forth in a relatively comprehensive form as long ago as the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin. In addition, Americans easily assumed that spiritual satisfaction would automatically accompany material success. The dream was to be realized in an agrarian civilization, a way of life presumed better—far better—than the urban alternative. [Thomas Jefferson](#) firmly established the myth of the garden—the concept of agrarian virtue and the urban vice—in American minds. During the turbulent era of westward expansion the myth gained increasing stature.

James Gatz of North Dakota had dreamed a special version of the American dream. Fitzgerald tells us that it constituted "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." When Gatz lay dead, his father told Nick Carraway that "Jimmy was bound to get ahead." As a child, Gatz set about preparing to realize his dream. He early decided that he could contemplate future glory so long as he scheduled his life properly and adhered to a set of general resolves—resolves quite obviously derivative from [Poor Richard](#). "No smokeing [*sic*] or chewing." "Bath every other day." "Be better to parents." Yes, James Gatz was *bound* to get ahead, bound as securely to his goal as was Captain Ahab to the pursuit of the white whale. *The Great Gatsby* is the chronicle of what happened when James Gatz attempted to realize the promise of his dream.

Gatz thought himself different—very different—from the common run of mankind. We learn that his parents were "shiftless and unsuccessful"—and that "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all." He possessed a "Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God." As a son of God—*God's boy*—he "must be about His Father's business." What was that business? It was "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." Gatz plainly imagined himself a Christ—one of the anointed—born of earthly parents but actually a son of God. This is what Fitzgerald sought to convey in establishing that "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." That conception moved him to seek out goodness and beauty—certainly a prostituted goodness and beauty, but goodness and beauty nevertheless.

When his moment came—at seventeen—James Gatz changed his name. The question of the name change has not received the attention it deserves. Some believe that Fitzgerald derived "Gatsby" from the slang term for pistol current during the Jazz Age—gat. Others see in the act of changing names an intimation of "Jewishness" in the hero, a view supported by the frequency of the name "Jay" among the Jews. Jay Gould comes immediately to mind as do Jay Cooke and J. P. Morgan. Also, it is known that the inspiration for the novel came from Fitzgerald's chance encounter with a Jewish bootlegger.

It is, of course, conceivable that Fitzgerald had some or even all of these things in mind, and it is also possible that he had still another thought. Could it be, however unlikely, that he was rendering the literal "Jesus, God's boy" in the name of Jay Gatsby? (In ordinary pronunciation, the 't' easily changes to 'd' as in "Gad.") This conjecture might appear hopelessly far-fetched, were it not for Fitzgerald's discussion of Gatz's "Platonic conception of himself," and his direct use of the phrase "son of God." In any case, Gatsby began his pursuit of goodness and beauty when he changed his name, and that pursuit ultimately ended in tragedy.

Fitzgerald develops the tragedy of Jay Gatsby as the consequence of his quixotic quest for Daisy Buchanan. Daisy represents that "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" to which Gatsby aspired. When Jay met Daisy, he realized that he had "forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath." He knew that "his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." When he kissed her, "she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete." What was the incarnation? In Daisy, Gatsby's meretricious dream was made flesh. He sought ever after to realize his dream in union with her.

The trouble with Gatsby's quest was that Daisy was completely incapable of playing the role assigned to her. She was as shallow as the other hollow people who inhabited Fitzgerald's Long Island. She could never become a legitimate actualization of Gatsby's illegitimate dream. Gatsby was himself culpable. He was not truly God's boy perhaps, but he possessed a certain grandeur, an incredible ability to live in terms of his misguided dream. Nick Carraway understood this, telling Gatsby at one point that he was "worth the whole damned crowd put together."

Both Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband, possessed wealth. Gatsby at least used his wealth to seek out beauty and claim it for himself. Buchanan the lecher lacked any larger goals. In the end, Daisy chooses to remain with Buchanan, and Gatsby is murdered by the deranged husband of Myrtle Wilson, Buchanan's mistress, who had been accidentally run down and killed by Daisy. Buchanan serves as Gatsby's executioner; he allows George Wilson to believe that Gatsby had killed Myrtle.

Gatsby was as alone in death as he had been in life. Of all the hordes who had accepted his largesse when alive, only one—an unnamed "owl-eyed man" who had admired Gatsby's books—appeared at the funeral. He delivered a pathetic epitaph: "The poor son-of-a-bitch."

The tragedy is over; Fitzgerald speculates on its meaning through the narrator, Nick Carraway. Carraway notes that Jay and the others—Nick himself, his sometime girl friend Jordan Baker, Daisy, and Tom—all were from the Middle West. It was not the Middle West of popular imagination, of the lost agrarian past, but rather the cities of the middle border. "That's my Middle West," muses Carraway, "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow." Carraway continues: Gatsby and his friends "were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." The East held many attractions, but the expatriate Westerner lived there at his peril. So Carraway went home. He could at least survive, though he might not prosper, in prairie cities.

Why had Gatsby failed? It was because the time for dreaming as Gatsby dreamed had passed. In what must be, in its implications, one of the most moving passages in American literature, Fitzgerald completes his commentary on Jay Gatsby: "His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity behind the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

The future to which Gatsby aspired is indeed in the past. His dream—the American dream—had been nurtured in the agrarian past that was no more. Fitzgerald's symbolism is never more ingenious than in his depiction of the bankruptcy of the old agrarian myth. This task he accomplishes through the most haunting and mysterious of the symbols which appear in the book—the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Here is one of the cruelest caricatures in the American novel. For Dr. T. J. Eckleburg is none other than a devitalized Thomas Jefferson, the pre-eminent purveyor of the agrarian myth.

What is it that Dr. Eckleburg's eyes survey? It is the valley of democracy turned to ashes—the garden defiled: "This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a

transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight ... [Dr. Eckleburg's] eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground." Fitzgerald thus presents a remarkably evocative description of the corruption that had befallen Jefferson's garden.

At the very end of the novel, Fitzgerald betrays his affection for the myth of the garden, despite his awareness that it could no longer serve Americans. His narrator Carraway once again serves as the vehicle for his thoughts: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

Alas, poor Jay Gatsby! "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—" Alas, all of us! The novel ends on a desperately somber note: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

American writers in the Twenties were an entirely new breed—divorced from the literary tradition which had matured between the Civil War and World War I. That tradition culminated in the literary Establishment presided over by William Dean Howells in the last years before the outbreak of the Great War. Henry F. May has summarized the basic tenets of Howells and his minions in *The End of American Innocence*: Howells "had always insisted that real truth and moral goodness were identical, and he had always held that politics and literature were both amenable to moral judgment. He had always believed that American civilization was treading a sure path, whatever the momentary failures, toward moral and material improvement."

What had outmoded Howells? It was the realization, anticipated before the Great War but complete only in the Twenties, that America had been transformed—transformed by the onset of an overwhelming process of industrialization and urbanization which had superannuated traditional American beliefs—beliefs nurtured in the bosom of the agrarian past.

In these circumstances, a revolution in manners and morals was inevitable. [World War I](#) augmented rather than inaugurated the trend. Postwar writers undertook a comprehensive critique of traditional faith. Some abhorred the change; others welcomed it. In any case, almost all of the great writers of the Twenties accepted the fact of the intellectual and emotional revolution deriving from the obsolescence of prewar standards. They launched a comprehensive critique of traditional faiths, and for their efforts they received much public notice and approbation.

What accounts for the success of these literary revolutionists? The answer resides in the fact that America was generally "new" in the Twenties. George Mowry and other recent historians have effectively documented the distinctive "modernity" of America in the wake of World War I—a modernity discernible in the mass culture as well as among the elite. The transitional years had passed; the change from the rural-agricultural past to the urban-industrial future was relatively complete, and readers as well as writers responded to this reality. To be sure, the defenders of the old America ensconced behind crumbling barricades in the Old South and the farther Middle West fought extensive rearguard actions—fundamentalist assaults on evolution, prohibitionist bans on spirituous liquors, and racist campaigns for the preservation of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America—but these were last desperate attempts to postpone the inevitable. The most important fact about reaction in the Twenties was that it failed. In each instance "modernity" ultimately triumphed over tradition.

Significant writers in the Twenties were above all dedicated to the imposing task of pointing out the error of living in terms of obsolete values—however useful those values might have been in the past. This effort is perhaps most obvious in the novels of Ernest Hemingway. In [The Sun Also Rises](#) Hemingway wastes little time investigating the reasons why Jake Barnes, Lady Brett, Robert Conn, and other characters in the novel must live differently than before. Hemingway's emphasis is on method—on how to live in the revolutionized context. Scott Fitzgerald dealt with the other side of the coin—the bankruptcy of the old way. Jay Gatsby's dream was patently absurd—however noble, however "American." [Benjamin Franklin](#) and Thomas Jefferson were unsound guides to life in the modernity of the vast eastern Urbana, the East of West Egg, Long Island—and also for life in the new Midwest to which the chastened Carraway returned. The final irony of the novel is that Fitzgerald could discern no beauty in the city to compare with the beauty, however meretricious, inherent in Gatsby's Platonic conception of himself.

Source: David F. Trask, "A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," in *University Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, March, 1967, pp. 197-202

The Great Gatsby: Suggested Essay Topics

Chapter 1

1. Consider the references to people in literature or history in the chapter. What purpose(s) do they serve?
2. Write a character sketch of Daisy (or Tom or Jordan), focusing on the recurring "tag" used to describe them. Daisy leans forward and talks in a low voice; Tom is restless and hulking; Jordan balances something on her chin almost in an athletic stance. What is Fitzgerald's purpose in thus describing them?
3. Explain how the first chapter of this novel is critically important in the development of plot, characters, and themes.

Chapter 2

1. Consider the possibilities of an agrarian society being the epitome of the American Dream. Find evidences of farming or pastoral scenes and diction in the first two chapters which suggest the belief that such a society fulfills the ideal American Dream.
2. Contrast the green light at the end of chapter 1 and the gray images in the Valley of Ashes in chapter 2. What thematic statement do the contrasting images reveal?
3. How can George Wilson be said to symbolize the American Dream? Consider the Horatio Alger ("rags-to-riches") motif, as well as his undying desire to better his situation.
4. Write about Fitzgerald's poetic style, focusing especially on the vivid metaphors and images, such as this description from Catherine: "Her eyebrows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle, but the efforts of nature toward the restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face." How is Fitzgerald a disciplined writer with great control of his prose?
5. Research descriptions of archetypal heroes, including their mysterious beginnings associated with rumors and mythical power. Consider Gatsby as such a hero, based upon the rumors surrounding him.

Chapter 3

1. Trace references to music in the Jazz Age—specific songs, types of instruments, description of the sounds—and draw a conclusion about their purpose(s). Discuss the dominant musical types of the 1920s.

2. Find a list of the seven deadly sins and the seven cardinal virtues. Write a paper in which you analyze some or all of the characters in regard to these sins and virtues. Which vice or virtue does each manifest?
3. Study Nick as a symbol of honesty and Jordan as a symbol of dishonesty. Write a character sketch which reveals their likenesses and differences in terms of veracity and credibility.

Chapter 4

1. Show how the American Dream associated with America's past has succumbed to mercenary, almost exclusively materialistic values, derived from get-rich-quick schemes. Find evidence of the historical basis in fact and corresponding evidence in the novel.
2. Elaborate on the epigram: "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired." Show how it contributes to the development of plot, character, and theme in the novel. Give justification for its being the single most important line in the novel.
3. Determine where this chapter fits on the pyramid of dramatic structure: antecedent action (or what has taken place before the action of the novel begins), inciting moment (or the catalyst which creates interest in the actions and conflicts which follow), rising action (or the intensifying of interest and suspense), climax (or most intense moment from which there is no turning back for the protagonist), reversal (or falling action), and denouement (or tying up of loose ends). Defend your decision.
4. Select one or more of the names Nick lists on his timetable, and research to discover their stories and to comprehend Fitzgerald's choice of those names. How were they involved in American history?
5. Research Montenegro and discern its role in World War I. Gauge Gatsby's account of wartime activity by these historical findings.

Chapter 5

1. Consider ways in which Gatsby might be a counterpart to Don Quixote. Research the characteristics of this fictional Spanish dreamer, and write an essay in which you show their likenesses and, of course, differences.
2. Consider ways in which Tom Buchanan and George Wilson are alike, in that the wives of both men are capable of being lured away by another man. Therefore, both men, different as they are, are cuckolds (a [Middle Ages](#) term, defining men whose wives are unfaithful. In the legendary account, such husbands were said to grow horns, thus becoming monsters).
3. The reunion of Daisy and Gatsby, a rather sordid relationship, signals simultaneously the beginning and the end of Gatsby's dream and of his success. Justify this statement.

Chapter 6

1. Study the various parties and guests at the parties in order to construct a thesis and arguments that typify America and Americans at play in the 1920s. What do the parties reveal about these guests?
2. Consider all the meanings of Daisy's admiration for the movie director leaning over his wife. Does she see herself in that image? Is Fitzgerald simply magnifying film, a new medium in the 1920s?
3. Gatsby grew into adolescence after being introduced to a tawdry lifestyle on Dan Cody's yacht. Show how the boy on the yacht was ironically more worldly and realistic than the unrealistic adult gazing longingly at the green light.
4. In what ways can Nick be said to be the real hero of the story? Prove your answer.

5. Select a line or a passage about time and show its thematic significance.

Chapter 7

1. Write an essay analyzing the Gatsby-Trimalchio connection and its importance. Compare Trimalchio, the hero or protagonist of [The Satyricon](#), to Gatsby. Refer to William Rose Benét's *The Reader's Encyclopedia* for concise background information.

2. Trace the recurring image of eyes, and ascertain the purposes of those images. Consider blindness on any level as well as sight.

3. Compare the two passages below from T. S. Eliot's [The Waste Land](#) with remarkably similar ones from *The Great Gatsby*. Better still, find a copy of the poem and discover other passages which correspond. What do the similarities suggest?

"I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones...."

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?
'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
'With my hair down, so, What shall we do tomorrow?"

and from *Gatsby*, chapter 2:

"It seemed to me that the thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms—but apparently there were no such intentions in her head."

and from chapter 7:

"What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?" cried Daisy, "and the day after that, and the next thirty years?"

4. Explain the significance of the comments: "They weren't happy ... and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together."

Chapter 8

1. Some of the characters in the novel symbolize a production ethic; others symbolize a consumption ethic. Classify the characters accordingly, and draw a conclusion about the American Dream, as you understand it, from Fitzgerald.

2. Eyes and sight recur frequently in the novel. What is Fitzgerald's statement about the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality?

3. How is this story an ironic inversion of a knightly quest for the grail?

Chapter 9

1. Why does Nick compare the Dutch sailors to Gatsby? How does the comparison help to state Fitzgerald's conclusion?

2. How is the story an ironic twist of the American Dream? Consider Daisy and Gatsby, Daisy and Tom, Myrtle and George Wilson, Myrtle and Tom, Nick and Jordan.

3. Nick speaks of the “corruption” of Gatsby’s guests and Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream.” How do these phrases begin to pull all the threads of the story together?
4. How does Fitzgerald make statements about pseudo-intellectualism?
5. Fitzgerald demonstrates the power of proper names. Prove this statement.
6. Compare the beginning and the ending of the novel. Has Gatsby changed? Has Nick changed? Explain and justify your responses.

The Great Gatsby: Sample Essay Outlines

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are based on the entire book. Following each topic is a thesis and sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

• Topic #1

Henry Steele Commager in *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* contends that “the tragedy is not that Gatsby lies dead, the rooms in his fabulous mansion silent—but that while he lived he realized all his ambitions.” Justify this contention.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Although Gatsby’s end was tragic, he was able to realize his ambitions.*

II. He fulfilled the ambition of acquiring money.

A. By illegal means, he acquired massive amounts of money.

III. He fulfilled the ambition of experiencing love.

A. By determination, he experienced a physical relationship with Daisy.

IV. He fulfilled the ambition of gaining popularity.

A. Through generosity, he entertained hundreds of guests.

• Topic #2

How do literary devices add to the dimension of depth or texture to this novel?

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Fitzgerald employs several devices, including color imagery, symbols, and descriptive tags, throughout the novel.*

II. Color imagery conveys dual meanings.

A. Yellow is associated not only with bright, heavenly scenes, opulence, and wealth, but also with corruption and decay.

III. Symbols add meaning.

A. Cars symbolize restlessness, driving ambition, recklessness.

B. Eyes symbolize the presence or absence of God.

IV. Recurring “tags” of description characterize effectively.

A. Jordan’s “jauntiness” establishes her as atypical and yet representative of young women in the 1920s.

- **Topic #3**

Prove that *Gatsby* really is worth more than “the whole damn bunch put together.”

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Nick’s assertion that Gatsby is worth more than “the whole damn bunch put together” is supported by Gatsby’s purer motives and actions.*

II. *Gatsby* retains the American Dream in its purest form.

A. He has the quality of the original seekers of the dream—the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

III. He adheres to the precept of accepting consequences.

A. Having “taken” Daisy that night in Louisville, he feels it is his responsibility to marry her.

IV. *Gatsby* possesses indefatigable hope.

A. He believes Daisy will do the right thing, will make the moral choice she failed to make five years before, especially now that he can provide for her needs materially.

- **Topic #4**

Show how literary techniques most effectively convey Fitzgerald’s theme of waste in the American Dream.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *A primary theme of the novel is waste, which Fitzgerald conveys through not only the narrative but with literary devices as well.*

II. Symbols effectively convey wasted energy.

A. Cars, the green light, and the billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes convey waste on different levels.

III. Imagery effectively conveys wasted lives.

A. Color and heat images convey decadence.

IV. Naming effectively conveys wasted opportunity.

A. Name of the novel, names of characters, and names of places suggest a waste of ideals.

V. Other devices convey the same theme.

A. Settings

B. Contrasts

The Great Gatsby: Compare and Contrast

- **1920s:** The Ku Klux Klan stages a parade in Washington, D.C. with 40,000 marchers in white hoods.

Today: The neo-Nazi and white “skinhead” supremacist movements have taken hold in parts of the U.S. A bombing suspect in the Oklahoma City federal building explosion, which killed over 160 people, expresses his anger at the FBI’s mishandling of a standoff with a separatist group at Waco, Texas, in which the compound burned and many people were killed.

- **1920s:** Prohibition is passed, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor. Al Capone takes over as boss of Chicago bootlegging from racketeer Johnny Torrio, who retires after sustaining gunshot wounds.

Today: The use and abuse of alcohol grows in the U.S., as does participation in the twelve-step program called Alcoholics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation centers, and other support mechanisms designed to stem the fallout from drug abuse. Though still powerful in the drug and prostitution business, several Mafia dons, including John Gotti, are imprisoned for life.

- **1920s:** Political machines like New York's Tammany Hall openly and directly influence the outcome of elections by paying lawmakers and police to make or enforce policies in their favor.

Today: While direct bribery of politicians and police is neither open nor widespread, there are still political scandals regarding funding of political campaigns. Members of both Democratic and Republican parties have been accused of taking illegal contributions, and campaign finance reform is a hot political issue.

The Great Gatsby: Topics for Further Study

- Read three of Fitzgerald's short stories dealing with the Jazz Age and compare and contrast these to *The Great Gatsby*. Suggested stories are: "The Rich Boy," "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," and "Absolution." Investigate the role of religion and material well-being in Fitzgerald's fiction, based on his life.
- It is said that Fitzgerald's life mirrored the life of America during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Chart the decline and growth of America's economy during this time and draw parallels between them and Fitzgerald's life during those particular periods.
- Much has been written of the American expatriate writers in Paris. Read a book by or about these authors, such as *A Charmed Circle* or [The Sun Also Rises](#) and define the characteristics of these expatriates, their attitudes to events in the U.S. and Europe, and their choice of lifestyle. Include Fitzgerald's trips to Paris and the Riviera in your observations.
- Conservative v. liberal elements in society create specific legislation designed to protect the interests of all citizens. Prohibition was one example of the U.S. government's attempts to appease those who opposed the overabundance of liquor in the society. What are other examples of this in the field of education in the 1920s? Demonstrate how the conservative/liberal elements operated in other countries at that time.
- Examine the Dadaist art movement in Europe—as demonstrated in the works of Marcel Duchamps—and compare its tenets and manifestations to the New York adaptation of this popular art form. Note the philosophy behind this movement and relate it to the Wasteland motif in *The Great Gatsby*.
- Relate the tales of Bonnie and Clyde's shooting spree, Al Capone's underworld activities, and other major scandals of the times. Examine why gangsterism and crime were romanticized in the Twenties, and why they are romanticized today as well.

The Great Gatsby: Media Adaptations

- *The Great Gatsby* was first adapted as a film by Richard Maibaum as producer and Elliott Nugent as director. It stars Alan Ladd, Betty Field, Macdonald Carey, Barry Sullivan, and Shelley Winters, Paramount, 1949.
- The second film was produced by David Merrick, directed by Jack Clayton, and written for the screen by Francis Ford Coppola. The cast features Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Bruce Dern, Sam Waterston, and Karen Black, Paramount, 1974; available from Paramount Home Video.
- The novel has been recorded twice, once by The Audio Partners, Listening Library. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Alexander Scourby, 1985.
- The other sound recording is by Recorded books, Audiobooks. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Frank Muller, 1984.

The Great Gatsby: What Do I Read Next?

- *The Twenties* by Edmund Wilson, one of Fitzgerald's friends at Princeton University and his entire life, is an interesting introduction to the decade and to the many cultural figures in America at that time. Another book by Wilson that chronicles the Twenties and Thirties is *The Shores of Light*, 1952. Personal impressions, sketches, letters, satires, and pieces on the classics of American literature are included in this book.
- [Heart of Darkness](#) (1899) by [Joseph Conrad](#) was a literary favorite of Fitzgerald, who used the Polish author's narrative technique in *The Great Gatsby*. The short novel is the story of the civilized Mr. Kurtz, who travels to the savage heart of Africa, only to find his evil soul.
- *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's legendary 1941 film, is about a mogul who acquires tremendous financial success but finds that the true source of his happiness is a childhood memory of "Rosebud." Once again, the true values of gains and losses are examined in this well-known classic.
- *Six Tales of the Jazz Age and Other Stories* [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) 1922. This is the author's second collection of short stories, the most notable of which is "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." The recurrent theme of fantasy and winning the top girl and financial success is central to this and other stories.
- [Great Expectations](#) (1861) by [Charles Dickens](#) tells of a grim childhood and an orphan's encounter with wealth and lost love in England during the Victorian era. In its realistic mode, one can find a number of differences between this story and Fitzgerald's, yet striking similarities as well, in regard to dreams and human relationships.

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For Further Study

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Bloom, Harold, ed. *Gatsby*, Major Literary Characters Series. Chelsea House, 1991. This comprehensive collection of articles focusing on the novel's "hero," Gatsby, begins with 25 critical extracts on the character and the author from letters, reviews, and articles. Of particular interest is the article by Arnold Weinstein, "Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby" (1985), which reads the novel as being about making meaning, or creating belief. This includes both Gatsby's fiction of himself and Nick's story of this. The collection also includes an important early article on the time theme by R. W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time" (1955).

Bruce, M. J., ed. *New Essays on 'The Great Gatsby'*. Cambridge University Press, 1985. This shorter work (five articles with an introduction) also includes an interesting overview of the novel's impact on fiction and criticism over the decades, "Gatsby's Long Shadow: Influence and Endurance," by Richard Anderson.

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Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli. Cambridge University Press, 1991. Bruccoli's critical edition of the novel contains the useful "apparatus" (notes keyed to page numbers in the novel) which had been published separately in 1974, when the novel was still under copyright protection. This edition now explains many of the novel's more obscure references, and points to some of its infamous inconsistencies (the age of Daisy Fay's daughter, for instance). Bruccoli himself is perhaps the most prolific of Fitzgerald's biographers and critics, and has also edited numerous editions of Fitzgerald's correspondence, manuscript facsimiles, notebooks, and even accounts ledgers.

Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual, various years. This yearly periodical devotes itself to the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.

Kazin, Alfred. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*. Twayne, 1951. This collection of essays on the author's literature is considered to be one of the best single volumes of criticism on Fitzgerald. Arranged chronologically, the material ranges from early reviews of the first novel through other critical reactions to Fitzgerald.

Lockridge, Ernest, ed. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of 'The Great Gatsby': A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, 1968. An earlier collection of seven articles and nine brief “View Points” on the novel, briefly encapsulating a range of different approaches to the novel.

Malin, Irving. “‘Absolution’: Absolving Lies,” in *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Approaches in Criticism*, edited by Jackson Bryer. University of Wisconsin Press, 1982. This article links the ideas of the short story with *The Great Gatsby*. The author demonstrates how Fitzgerald is, to some extent, a religious writer.

Mellow, James R. *Invented Lives*. Houghton Mifflin, 1984. This is a full portrait of Fitzgerald, his hunger for fame, his destructive marriage, and a backward look to an era that continues to dazzle us with its variety and intrigue.

Tuttleton, James. *The Novel of Manners*. Norton, 1972. The book offers a revealing perspective on Fitzgerald's ability to identify social and cultural manners in the 1920s American society. Reference is made to [Henry James](#) and other writers' works.

The Great Gatsby: Pictures

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